



1 Timothy 1:6-17



It's hard to imagine that last month was the eighth anniversary of the Asian tsunami that killed over 200,000 people and this April will already be the second anniversary of the Japanese tsunami that claimed the lives of 16,000 men, women and children. Before then, few of us really knew what a tsunami really was. It was just not in our vocabulary or our experience. We now know that tsunamis are not massive 200 foot today waves that break on shore like this

photoshopped picture. This may be why tsunamis were so devastating. When the tide pulled out to sea by 100 feet or more, no one understood that this was a precursor for the massive deluge of water that would follow. It's not the height of a tsunami that causes destruction but the amount of water that is pushed inland.

In his opening paragraphs to his disciple Timothy, Paul described a tsunami of grace that overwhelms every believer. This kind of tsunami is a wonderful thing but even more powerful than ocean tsunamis.

6 *Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.*

8 *Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, 9 understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, 10 the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, 11 in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.*

12 *I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, 13 though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. 17 To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

Did you catch the tsunami of grace that Paul highlights here? The key verse is 14—*the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus*. For Paul, the grace of God overflowed into his life and if it was true for Paul, it should be true for you and me. Do you experience the grace of God overflowing in your life? Does the grace of God usually feel like a tsunami to you? If not, then we need to understand why Paul felt the way he did, because he was not merely making a theological point here. If doctrine was his only aim he would have said, “The grace of God was sufficient for me” or “My need was great but God’s grace was greater than all my sin.” Paul always seems to begin with doctrine but he also moves to experience. He was saying that God’s grace not only was overwhelming but it felt overwhelming to him. Let’s try to understand how he arrived at that powerful experience of grace.

If you recall from last Sunday, in verse three, Paul told Timothy to *remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine*. The young pastor Timothy, was battling false teaching and false teachers. Verse seven tells us quite a bit about the challenge that Timothy faced—*desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions*.

We learn three things from this verse.

1. They desired to be “teachers of the law.”
2. They did not understand what they were teaching
3. They were confident in their teaching.

Don’t you that these last two often go together? It is amazing to me how often confidence and ignorance go hand in hand. The classic example is the guy who won’t ask for driving directions. The guy is actually lost but he is confident in his lostness and confident that he is going the right direction. Many little spats among husbands and wives are this way. The wife asserts that her viewpoint is correct and the husband is confident that he is right. Both are stuck in their prideful positions and unwilling to budge. But this is far worse when it comes to false teaching. False

teachers can be very convincing and this is usually the case because they skillfully weave a bit of falsehood into truth so you can't tell the difference. So don't be carried away just because someone seems confident.

We don't know exactly what they were teaching but we can reconstruct a little from other parts of 1 Timothy.

3—any different doctrine

4—nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather

6—vain discussions

20—blasphemy

4:3—who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

It appears that they were teaching a form of law or legalism in regard to lifestyles of the believers at Ephesus, requiring abstinence and even forbidding marriage in some cases. We need to see the difference between two types of legalism: works-based salvation (or legalism in regard to salvation) and works-based lifestyle (or legalism in regard to lifestyle). The type of legalism that Paul encountered in Galatia was works-based salvation which put extra requirements into salvation. The Jews in Galatia believed that you needed to have faith in Jesus as Savior but they also taught that you needed to be circumcised and follow other requirements of the law. Works-based salvation requires faith plus something else, and is the most dangerous of the two types.

The second type, works-based lifestyle, is what Timothy encountered in Ephesus. They did not seem to be placing requirements of the law as a basis for salvation, because if they had, Paul would have made that clear. The false teachers probably believed that faith in Christ was all that was necessary for salvation but then they add extra requirements as part of the Christian life. This is what a legalistic church still looks like in our day. Think about a legalistic church with which you are familiar. Officially, they would never add anything other than faith in Christ to salvation but then they have all of these unwritten lists of rules about what a Christian is supposed to look like. These rules have to do with lifestyle—how you dress, what you eat and drink, all of your entertainment choices, how many times you attend church per week, etc. so I think the legalists in Ephesus looked more like a typical legalistic church than anything else we are familiar with.

In contrast to these overly confident false legalists, Paul said that the law does have a good and important function. **8** *Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, 9 understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, 10 the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, 11 in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.*

In his list of vices and sins, Paul was actually quoting through the ten commandment, as you can see from this chart.

1 Timothy 12	Ten Commandments
Lawless and disobedient	
Ungodly and sinners	1 st —You shall have no other gods before me.
Unholy	4 th —Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
profane	3 rd —You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain
those who strike their fathers and mothers	5 th —Honor your father and your mother
murderers	6 th —You shall not murder
sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality ¹	7 th —You shall not commit adultery.
Enslavers “A man-stealer”	8 th —You shall not steal.
Liars, perjurers	9 th —You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Commandments 1-4 are a bit sketchy and uncertain of their direct correspondence to 1 Timothy. But Commandments 5-9 are quite obvious and go in order from commandments 5-9. There is no question that Paul is quoting from the ten commandments.

The law, as summarized by the ten commandments, has a good purpose and Paul develops this idea much further in the book of Romans and Galatians. Here is a sampling of his doctrine of the Law.

Romans 3:20—*For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*

Romans 7:7—*What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”*

Galatians 3:19—*Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made...*

The law is diagnostic, not rehabilitative. An x-ray can tell you that your leg bone is broken but it cannot set the bone. A blood test can diagnose your anemia but it cannot heal it. An MRI might show cancer but it is powerless to cure the cancer. In the same way, the law diagnoses the cancer of sin in our lives. It tells us that we have fallen short. It tells us that we are not good enough to earn the right to be in God’s presence. What the law does is a good thing, just as Paul said it was, but that is all that the law can do.

In verse thirteen, Paul applied the law to his former way of life: *though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.* Now how do we reconcile Paul’s statement with what he said in Philippians 3:6 where he wrote, *as to righteousness under the law, blameless.* How can he be blameless as to the law but also convicted of his sin by the law. How can both of these be true? He was blameless in the outward observance of the fine points of the law. He was a legalist of this highest degree but after his conversion he was able to look back and realize that

inwardly, he was a miserable sinner. Paul allowed the law to do what it was intended to do—to convict of sin. He raised the issue of his blamelessness in Philippians just to say that if anyone should have been justified by the law, it would have been him. If legalism earned you points in heaven, he would have been the top dog, but the law can only diagnose sin, but not cure it.

The second half of verse thirteen almost sounds like an excuse. *But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.* Was Paul saying that he received mercy from the Lord *because* he acted in ignorance? There are two magic phrases that all kids use to get out of trouble. One is “I forgot” and the second is “You never told me.” The first phrase tries to get mom and dad to believe that you really are responsible, you’re just occasionally forgetful. But the second phrase, “You never told me” attempts to lay blame on the parent. “I was ignorant. I didn’t know and how could I have known, because you never told me.”

If this were written by you and I, this is probably what we would have meant. We would have offered this excuse of ignorance. But this is not what Paul meant because the Bible never lets you off with the excuse of ignorance.

Peter said something similar in his first sermon in Acts. *And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out* (Acts 3:17-19). Peter admitted that there was an element of ignorance to what they did. Pilate did not have full awareness of what he was doing. He did not understand that Jesus was the savior of the world. The crowds who screamed for his death did not have a fully developed Christology. But despite all of this, Peter still called them repentance.

Another point I think Paul was making is that he acted in ignorance, but the false teachers acted with full knowledge. They knew the true gospel message because they had walked away from it. It is much worse to know the truth and flat out walk away then it is to be “ignorant” of it and walk away. Jesus verified this truth.

Matthew 11:23-24—*And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.*”²

Therefore, preaching the gospel brings sinners to repentance but it also hardens hearts and confirms their just punishment. It is much worse to know the full truth and have rejected it than to know less than the full truth and reject it, even though in neither case is ignorance an excuse for unbelief.

But Paul was not trying to excuse away his unbelief. In fact, he assigns the highest possible blame to himself in verse fifteen. *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.*³ We know this verse better from the King James where it is translated as Paul being the “chief” of sinners. The NIV says he was the “worst” of sinners.

Please understand that this was not false humility. This is not Paul politely mentioning his weaknesses and shortcomings. This is the real Paul having come to terms with his former self. He had killed people in the name of God. Paul was a Jewish terrorist. He initiated a campaign of extermination against the new believers. He sought and received permission from the Jewish authorities to do whatever it took to wipe out the Christian vermin.

Ever since 911, you and I know the real danger of Muslim terrorists but Paul was a Jewish terrorist. He was engaged in Jewish Jihad. He was the ring leader of a violent terrorist plot to annihilate believers. To you and I terrorism seem like great crimes, don't they? Most believers struggle occasionally with guilt over past sins but can you imagine if you had murdered someone? Not only was Paul a murderer and a terrorist. But isn't it interesting that though he referred to himself as a persecutor, he never mentions his having killed anyone? He was the chief of sinners and the chief sin he listed was blasphemy. Outwardly he honored God's name but if you kill someone in the name of God, that is a gross form of blasphemy. Paul sinned greatly against men but his chief sin was against the Lord. Like David cried out in the Psalms—"Against you and you only have I sinned."

Paul had been the chief of sinners, but then something happened to him: *the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus*. Most translations do not capture the depth of this verse. The NIV translates this as "abundant" grace. The NASB is closer is using the phrase "more than abundant." KJV is better still with its "exceeding abundant."

A theological dictionary defines the word like this. "It is a fundamentally unnecessary intensification of the simple form, which already carries the nuance of 'too much.'"⁴ Did you catch that? The word means "too much" but this word form intensifies the word which already means too much. I am not sure why they concluded that it was an "unnecessary intensification" because as smart as Paul was, I don't think he did anything that was unnecessary. He took this word which meant "too much" and made it mean "way too much" or as the ESV has, *overflowed*. The grace of God was not merely sufficient, it was way too much. It was much more than he needed, more than he could ever need, so he had to say it was overflowing—just like a tsunami overflows.

I will ask the question I asked earlier. Is this your perception of God's grace? Does it flow into your life like a tsunami or does it trickle like a leaky faucet. Do you know what the secret to experiencing this grace like a tsunami instead of a slow trickle? The secret to overflowing grace is to realize that you were the chief of sinners.

After Christmas I spoke at Living Waters and one of the things I told the teens was that apart from Christ, we were all the moral equivalent of Adam Lanza, the shooter from Sandy Hook elementary school. I joined in the discussion groups after the talk and they were really struggling with this idea, but they were struggling in a good way. They wanted to understand as one girl asked me, "But how can gossip be as bad as murder?" from a practical standpoint, obviously there are different consequences to our sins, but murder does not separate us from God anymore than gossip does. As a matter of fact, in his list of sins in Romans chapter one, Paul listed gossip alongside of murder. If we really knew how lost we were without Christ, each of would say. I

was the chief of sinners. I was the most miserable of them all. Grace will never be truly amazing until we see ourselves as having been foremost among sinners.

As he remembered his former ways and reflected on the tsunami of grace that was freely given to him, all that Paul could do was to sing. *To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

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¹ Leviticus 20:13.

² See also Matthew 10:13-15—*And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.*

³ This was a combination of two verses. Luke 19:10—*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.* Mark 2:17—*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*

⁴ . Vol. 6: *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. 1964- (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (electronic ed.) (263). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.