

The worst of sinners

1 Timothy 1:12-17

September 12, 2010

Who is the worst of sinners?

Is it the Saudi Arabian hijackers who brought down the twin towers of the World Trade Center nine years ago yesterday, killing more than 3000 people? Or is it the Florida pastor who made plans to commemorate that event by burning multiple copies of the Quran?

Is it the adulterous Iranian woman who slept with several other men and murdered her husband? Or is it the Iranian state officials who sentenced her to be stoned to death?

Is it the unemployed thirty-year old making a fast buck by dealing cocaine to junior high students? Or is it the big box retailer that fails to pay its workers a living wage?

Is it the president of Iran who denies the Jewish holocaust ever took place? Or is the Israeli military command arbitrarily demolishing the homes of Palestinian families?

Is it the person that caused you deep pain -- an insult, a hurt, that you cannot seem to forget or leave behind? Or is it you?

Who is the worst of sinners? I will tell you ...

No, I won't, at least not yet! I'll tell you later. But right now, I'll tell you whom Paul said is the worst of sinners -- himself! Paul wrote to Timothy:

I am the worst of them ...

Whew! I guess that leaves all of us off the hook! But why? Why did Paul consider himself the worst of sinners?

Because he was a murderer? No, though he did stand by and condone the murder of Stephen in Jerusalem.

Because he was an adulterer? No, by all accounts, Paul was not ever married.

Because he robbed people or defamed people or abused people? He did make life miserable for followers of Jesus, threatening them and imprisoning them without cause.

But the reason Paul considered himself the worst of sinners was because of what he did to Jesus. He wrote to Timothy:

I spoke evil of him and persecuted [him] and insulted him.

His sin which was the worst of sins was a lack of faith, a lack of faith in Jesus, relying on what he thought he knew, on what he thought was right, instead of putting himself wholly and wholeheartedly at Jesus' mercy. Hmmm ... If that's what it means to be the worst of sinners -- relying on what you think you know, on what you think is right, instead of putting yourself wholly and wholeheartedly at Jesus' mercy -- that's getting a little too close to home!

So, I am ready now to tell you who is the worst of sinners.

I am.

I am the worst of sinners. I cannot possibly answer that question any other way, because as soon as I say "he is the worst of sinners," as soon as I make myself out to be better than someone else in God's eyes, I have taken away God's prerogative and thereby judged myself, proving myself to be indeed the worst of sinners. The only way I can answer that question, "Who is the worst of sinners?," is to say ... "I am."

So, how would you answer that question?

Now that we have that matter cleared up! -- where does that leave me? Where does that leave you?

This is a true saying, to be completely accepted and believed: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Did you know that? Of course you knew that, or, at least, you've heard it before. But listen again!

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners ...

That includes me. That includes you.

"Christ" Jesus -- "Christ" means anointed one, messiah -- the messiah Jesus, came to save sinners. Not to teach students, not to provide an example for disciples, not to point the way for people who were momentarily confused, but to save sinners.

What does that mean: to save sinners? What does it mean to be saved? Well, how do we commonly use the word? We use the word, I think, in two related but different senses.

If I am about to step off the curb into the path of an oncoming car and a bystander pulls me back at the last moment, I say, "he saved my life." What I mean by that is that he prevented something from happening that would have been a very bad thing for me.

But if I am ill with a life-threatening disease and a physician's care brings healing to my body, I also say, "she saved my life." What I mean by that is that she took away what was killing me now and changed my present condition.

In the first sense, I am saved from what might have been, could have been, would have been, but my life goes on just as it was. In the second sense, I am saved from something that is, from the way things are, and my life thereafter is fundamentally changed.

It seems to me that, in the church, we have often thought of -- and taught -- spiritual salvation in the first sense. I deserve to be punished for my sins, but because of Jesus' intervention, God forgives me and I am saved from eternal punishment. The focus is on what might have been, could have been, would have been, but I don't have to worry about all that because I am forgiven. Because of Jesus, I get a free pass into heaven. Salvation is about what will become of me, one day, but for now, I just go on as I am as best I can.

I believe that view of salvation is mistaken and unfortunate, because here and now, in the real world God made and cares for, nothing is changed. Jesus save sinners in the second sense! Jesus utterly changes their lives!

How is a sinner saved? By not being a sinner anymore, or, at the very least, by not being under the power and influence of sin anymore. Think of all the symbols and metaphors the Bible uses for salvation ...

being born again ... To be saved is like starting all over again as a new person, a different person ...

baptism ... My life as it was is buried with Christ, and I am raised with Christ to a new life. I am marked with the sign of God's grace and I am given a new identity as God's child, as a member of God's family.

being filled with God's Holy Spirit ... On my own, I am bound by the laws of sin and death, but by the power of God's Spirit, I am set free, to live as God intends.

Being saved isn't like being given an excuse. It's like being healed.

This is a true saying, to be completely accepted and believed: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

That means, Jesus came into the world, not to leave it as it is and simply give us some good news about the world to come, but to change the world, to transform it, to change me, to transform you.

I am the worst of sinners, but because I have put my life into Jesus' hands, because I have put my faith, my trust, not in my own ability to recognize and do what is good, but in God's power to guide me and equip me and provide for me, I have my life back. I am saved.

And the faith and love Jesus planted in me -- not yet complete, but always growing, always growing -- have made me new and empower me to help change the world as it is, buffeted and beset by sin, into the world God wills it to be, one place, one person, one situation, at a time.

And if God can save me, the worst of sinners, just think of what God can do with you!