



Catalog No. 1606

1 Timothy 1:12-20

Fourth Message

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November 18th, 2007

THE MODEL OF RESTORATION: A TESTIMONY OF WEAKNESS AND GRACE

SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH

My religious roots are Mormon. My father and mother both came from Mormon families in Utah. My great grandfather, David Morgan, the son of a blacksmith, was born in Carmarthenshire, Wales. His father was a devout Baptist, but he felt the church lacked the life of the Spirit. One day he heard someone speaking to an excited crowd about Joseph Smith, who claimed to be a prophet of a new religion in America in which believers were “speaking in other tongues” and “being healed of their sicknesses.” On March 1, 1859, the Morgan clan left Wales on a six-week voyage to America. They settled in Pennsylvania, and there they worked in the coal mines. Within a year, rumors of civil war filled the air, and counsel came advising that all “saints” should seek refuge in Utah. At the age of fifteen, David made the two thousand-mile trek from Pennsylvania to Utah, pulling his blind mother in a handcart most of the way. They arrived in Spanish Fork on November 1, 1860.

Although my father was an agnostic for most of his life, the majority of the family remained closely tied to their Mormon heritage. My aunt worked in the genealogical records department of the church in Salt Lake City, and my uncle held a high office in the church. Her eightieth birthday provided the opportunity for me to attend a family reunion in Salt Lake. There I met with cousins I had not seen in thirty years. The day after the celebration, we gathered in my aunt’s home to reminisce. My uncle said to me, “I don’t know exactly what you do.” Then one of his daughters asked, “Does your church preach against Mormonism?”

A bit taken aback, I wondered how does one respond to a question like that? There was a bit of tension in the air and I did not want to engage in a doctrinal debate, especially with relatives. So I tried to think of how Jesus had disarmed opposing points of view. I remembered that he often relied on the power of the story. When he was utterly rejected by the townspeople in the country of the Gerasenes, after casting out a legion of demons from the demoniac, he simply obeyed the locals’ request and took his leave. However, when the healed man asked if he could join with him, Jesus wisely left him in that hostile area, knowing he had a powerful story to tell, a story that no one could refute:

Jesus did not let him, but said, “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed. (Mark 5:19-20)

Stories can be powerful, subversive tools to deconstruct ways of thinking that may be impervious to frontal attacks. Because stories take us into worlds outside of ourselves we let our guard down and are open to considering new perspectives that normally we would not entertain. Even when we are hiding behind fortified strongholds of sin, a well-crafted story, like a well-trained squad of navy seals, can slip past our defenses undetected and penetrate “to a place where facts fear to tread. It is a place so personal that it can spark an inner transformation.”¹

Paul adopts the same technique in his letter to Timothy. Seeking to authenticate his authority as an apostle over the false teachers, to establish the priority of faith in the gospel, and to display the pattern of salvation for world mission, he simply tells his story. In our text we will discover how God wants to use our story, which has been shaped by Christ’s story, to make us effective witnesses for the gospel.

I. Paul’s Testimony: Grace Found in Weakness (1:12-14)

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. (1 Tim 1:12-14 TNIV)

A. Paul’s present attitude: Appreciation (1:12)

How is Paul so certain that the gospel can change the lives of lawless, vile sinners? It is because of what Christ has personally done in his life. The apostle can’t get over the fact that God would consider him of all people worthy of his trust, appointing and empowering him unto his service to be his representative of the gospel to the Gentiles. There is something very attractive about people who overflow with appreciation for gifts they feel they don’t deserve.

B. Paul’s former condition: A vile sinner (1:13a)

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, . . . (1:13a)

In Paul’s case, his thanksgiving is magnified, knowing the depravity of his former life. He was the Lord’s chief adversary, who zealously tried to stamp out the life-giving gospel. With a bold brush he paints his former life in the darkest of hues, summing up his character in three words: *blasphemer*, *persecutor*, and *violent man*. The list of these deplorable sins qualifies him to be placed in his catalogue of vile, vicious persons for whom, he said, the “law was laid down.”

First, in his relationship to God, Paul labels himself a “blasphemer” – a crime punishable by death in the Old Testament. This is quite an admission coming from a former Pharisee who had thought that his life was blameless as to the law (Phil 3:6). But after his encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, his “righteous standing” came crashing down like a house of cards. Blinded by the glory of Christ, he immediately knew that his rage, directed against Jesus for his messianic claims, was a rejection of God’s saving work for the world.

Furthermore, as to his relationship to God’s people, Paul says he was a “persecutor.” This is a grave offense, as God’s holy presence is resident within his body, the church. Paul not only violated this holiness, he ravaged it, as he himself confessed during his trial before Agrippa:

Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities. (Acts 26:11)

Because he had profaned God’s holiness, Paul considered himself “the least of the apostles,” and “did not even deserve to be called an apostle” (1 Cor 15:9).

Finally, in his relationship towards society, Paul labels himself a “violent man.” The Greek term, *hybristes*, is derived from the root *hybris*, meaning “arrogant.” The word speaks of someone whose pride is so strong that it boils over into a pathological fury, demonstrating excessive violence that knows no bounds. *Hybris* was seen as the breeding ground for tyrants who were subject to no one. According to the Greeks, such a person was “above the gods.” Paul’s outrageous disregard for the rights of others included women, whom he had arrested and thrown into prison (Acts 22.4). Perhaps if Paul

were writing today he would label himself a “terrorist.” Would we have welcomed him into our homes after his conversion? Imagine how difficult it must have been for believers to embrace him after he had sent scores of their family members to prison, and with some, like Stephen, even presided over their death.

The good news, however, is that Paul’s story does not end in condemnation.

C. God’s relentless mercy (1:13b-14)

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. (1:13b-14)

The deep darkness gave way to the indescribable light of God’s mercy. Like the great Italian painters of the Renaissance who used chiaroscuro techniques to display their images in stirring contrasts between light and darkness, so Paul paints the glory of God’s relentless mercy in stark contrast to his former pitiless existence. With profound simplicity he states that God took the supreme initiative, stepping into his darkness and giving him that for which he was incapable of doing for himself, something he did not deserve.

Before Paul’s eyes were opened to see the living Christ he lived like unbelieving Israel, blinded by his ignorance of the truth and seeking to establish his own righteousness rather than submitting to God’s righteousness that is found in Jesus Christ (Rom 10:3). The fact that Paul claims “ignorance” is not an excuse for his unbelief, but rather a reference to the Old Testament distinction between “unintentional” and “defiant” (lit. “high-handed”) sins (Num 15:22-31) – which explains why he received God’s mercy instead of his wrath. We find the same motivation on the lips of Jesus as he petitions his Father on behalf of his executioners: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Peter made a similar appeal to the Jews who had disowned Jesus in favor of Barabbas: “Now, brothers and sisters, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders” (Acts 3:17). This discovery was the turning point of Paul’s life. It became the basis for his appeal to others to repent and embrace the gospel for, “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).

Paul glories in God’s mercy that not only granted him forgiveness but transformed him from the inside out. He describes it as being swept away in a great tidal wave of grace to an entirely new sphere of existence characterized by love and faith that finds its source in his union with Christ. Paul’s new status before God, his new relationship with Christ, and his new life in the Spirit drive home the reason for which Christ came to earth.

II. Paul’s Story Becomes a Prototype for All (1:15-17)

A. Paul’s story affirmed by the Incarnation (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. (1:15)

Towner comments, “Now Paul lays the capstone of his argument for the authority and relevance of his gospel in the world,”² by citing a “trustworthy saying,” that reflects a truth that is not only to be believed, but is also “worth welcoming wholeheartedly.”³ These “worthy sayings” occur five times in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; Tit 3:8; 2 Tim 2:1). They were used by Paul to affirm the divine origin of vital truths that had come under attack by the false teachers. If the saying is “trustworthy,” then in Paul’s mind it is God’s faithfulness that guarantees it.

This saying, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” captures the purpose of the incarnation and summarizes Jesus’ personal testimony of why he came (Matt 9:13; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32; 19:10). In the Old Testament, the term “sinner” was a reference to those in the gentile world who could not even recognize their creator. A worshipper in the Psalms would often ask to be cleansed of his “sins,” but he never called himself a “sinner,” for that would be like saying he lived “in another country,” outside of God’s revelation.

This explains why in Luke’s parable of the two men who went up to pray, the Pharisee thanks God that he is not like those other people: “robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or like this tax collector.” By contrast, the tax collector, knowing who he is, begs for mercy: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). The fact that Paul, a former Pharisee, now boldly claims the title “sinner” reveals that he has undergone a remarkable transformation in his thinking. He has just crossed over a monumental boundary marker and placed himself in that despised land of pagans. Furthermore, if there is any moral ranking within that despicable world, he says he is at the bottom of the heap, beneath even the tax collector!

B. Paul story, a prototype for all (1:16)

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. (1:16)

What gives Paul the remarkable freedom to expose the depravity of his former life is not only the fact that that gives glory to the immeasurable patience and mercy of God, it creates a platform for God’s mission to the world. Paul realizes that his salvation was no private matter. God wanted to use the conversion of his heart and the transformation of his character as a prototype for all who would come to believe. By being vulnerable, others are encouraged to embrace the gospel, knowing that if God can transform a “terrorist” like Saul into a sacrificial servant, he can transform anyone!

Many times we think that if we are honest and allow people to truly know what we are like we will become the objects of condemnation and be shut up in the shame of isolation. But the opposite is true. Being vulnerable about our weaknesses is what allows others to see the power of the gospel at work in our lives, and creates communities that are characterized by acceptance and love. When someone is keenly aware of his depravity, and has personally experienced the transforming power of the gospel, he exudes a passion for Christ that is difficult to resist.

Consider the appeal of Charles Spurgeon’s testimony as he recounted his first authentic experience with Christ in prayer:

I remember the first time I ever sincerely prayed. I do not recollect the words I used; surely, there were few enough words in that petition. I had often repeated a form; I had been in the habit of continually repeating it. At last, I came really to pray, and then I saw myself standing before God, in the immediate presence of the heart-searching Jehovah, and I said within myself, “I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye sees Thee; wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” I felt like Esther when she stood before the king, faint and overcome with dread. I was full of penitence of heart, because of His majesty and my sinfulness. I think the only words I could utter were something like these, “Oh! Ah!” And the only complete sentence was, “God be merciful to me, a sinner!” The overwhelming splendour of His majesty, the greatness of His power, the severity of His justice, the immaculate character of His holiness, and all His dreadful grandeur—these things overpowered my soul, and I fell down in utter prostration of spirit, but there was in that prayer a true and real drawing near to God.⁴

C. The shape of Paul’s testimony

a Thanksgiving for God’s grace (1:12)

b Paul’s *story* of mercy found in weakness (1:13-14)

x The purpose of the incarnation: To save sinners (1:15)

b’ Paul’s *story* is a prototype for all to come to faith (1:16)

a’ A Doxology of praise for God’s grace (1:17)

Because Paul understood that his ministry was the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to the nations, he knew that telling his story was vital to world evangelization. But as important as his story is, he makes sure it does not take center stage, usurping the glory that is due solely to God. Notice how he carefully shapes his testimony to guard against this. He begins with thanksgiving for the grace of God and ends in praise to the glory of God. At the center is the doctrine of the incarnation. In the midst of this grand scheme, Paul’s story serves as the human link to display the magnitude of

God's mercy, and becomes the prototype of the gospel's transforming power for all who would believe. So in the end, the Christ story that gave shape to Paul's story now shapes our story as the infinite mercy of God continues to reach out and claim sinners for the kingdom.

Any parent who has endured the excruciatingly painful period of waiting for a prodigal child to come home knows the emotional exhaustion of endless nights of spent sorrow and tireless tears. Yet in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, when the son comes into sight on the horizon, the father runs to embrace him, and the gaping sorrow is replaced by indescribable joy. Whatever pain the father endured is instantly gone in the presence of his son, who "was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:32). Many of you who have had a prodigal come home would heartily agree. Yet, who would want to endure that again? But in God's house, the Father goes through this unspeakable agony for all his children. Over and over, it never ends until every last child is home. That is why Paul concludes with such a magnificent doxology.

D. Doxology of praise (1:17)

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1:17)

The praise, when read in the congregation, was designed to elevate God in such a way that all would be drawn in to proclaim it. We would do well to reflect on these wonderful affirmations with the apostle. The first, to "the King eternal," or "the King of the ages," sets God apart from human rulers whose reigns are short lived and have no lasting influence. If the pompous rulers in Rome claimed absolute sovereignty, Isaiah says bluntly, "He brings princes to naught, and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing" (Isa 40:23). Our God is the unrivaled sovereign in every age.

Secondly, God is "immortal," meaning he is incorruptible and not subject to decay or death. He is also "invisible," meaning he "dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:16). Paul's final title, "the only God," reflects the monotheism of both the Old and New Testaments, ruling out all other rivals. Therefore to him alone belongs all our public proclamation of honor and praise for all times and ages. Our praise should never be directed to any man-made image or any created thing.

Taken together these terms provide a stark contrast to the profane idols of the ancient pagan world as well as those of our materialistic world. Perhaps there is no season like the weeks before Christmas that we need to lay hold of God's incorruptibility and invisibility. Who can resist being swept away by the wave of consumerism that drives us to meet everyone's expectations with material possessions? Yet, it doesn't take but a few hours after we have spent so much of ourselves pursuing material things at the expense of the eternal to taste their bitter corruptibility.

Having armed Timothy with the power of "the story," Paul concludes this section (1:1-20) by charging him to fight the good fight, being mindful of the terrible consequences incurred by the false teachers who had rejected the faith.

III. Raising the Stakes for the Battle (1:18-20)

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, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme. (1:18-20)

Given this new existence of the indwelling life of Christ, how could we ever consider leaving such a fragrant garden of love to become slaves again under law? It is ludicrous to Paul. The implications of so doing ought to weigh heavily on the false teachers. For those who had once been enlightened, and then chosen to reject their faith in a "high-handed" manner, are currently blaspheming the Lord. The consequences of such acts can be eternal. They ought to arouse our deepest fears (Heb 6:4-6).

Those whom Paul mentions, Hymenaeus and Alexander, were known to Timothy and have now been given over to the power of Satan, whose ends

they were already serving. The purpose behind the discipline was to remove them from the protective sphere of the body of Christ and give the devil free rein with them. Though severe, the goal is ultimately redemptive: that they might come their senses and repent of blasphemy, the very sin that dominated Paul's life prior to his conversion.

Paul's conclusion is a sober reminder of what is at stake in preserving the simplicity and purity of the gospel story. Reflecting on his testimony leaves us with three questions to ponder.

IV. Paul's Probing Questions

A. Where are we living?

If the central truth of the gospel is that Christ came into this world to save sinners, the implication is that if we are to follow Christ, we must get involved in this sinful world, and like Christ, change it from within. Being isolated in a Christian ghetto is not an option; we are to be right in the thick of things. The danger of the false teaching was that it was causing its followers to withdraw from the world by becoming self-absorbed with speculation and elitist in their legalism. These things might seem harmless to us, or perhaps at worst, a waste of time, but to Paul they were blasphemous because they had shut down God's mission for the world.

The gospel, being rooted in the Old Testament promises to bless all nations, is forever thrusting us outside our comfort zones to reach out to others to save them. Yet it is easy for us to forsake God's mission and become like a country club, hoarding our benefits for ourselves. Every time we gather for fellowship, prayer, or Bible study we must never lose sight of the goal that our spiritual growth is designed to bring salvation to those around us. The question is, To what degree have we shut down God's mission by cloistering our fellowship or discipleship? As Towner encourages, we must "resist our own tendencies to become absorbed in what we already have instead of reaching out with what others need to have."⁵

So Paul would ask us, Where are we living?

Secondly, he would ask, What is our attitude?

B. What is our attitude, living in the world?

Living in the world is not easy. It often leaves us with a complaining spirit. We complain about those we work with: our bosses and co-workers. We complain about those we live with: our neighbors, in-laws and spouses. We complain about those who influence our children: their teachers, principals, and coaches. We complain about our government: our President, the Republicans or the Democrats.

Yet when we do this we communicate that our well being is dependent on the environment that others create for us. But that is a lie. Our lives are rooted "in Christ." No situation can separate us from his life. Because of that truth, Paul's life was characterized by thanksgiving and praise, even in the most dreadful situations. When he and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison in Philippi, Luke says that around midnight they "were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25). They were singing because they knew that when believers suffer for doing what is right, God is creating a stage to lead others to Christ. In the end, the jailer who had once beaten them, "washed their wounds... brought them to his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household" (Acts 16:33-34).

Our attitude of thanksgiving and praise is what signals to the world that there is another dimension of life available to those who will believe in Christ. So Paul would ask, What is our attitude?

The final question Paul would ask of us is, What is our story?

C. What is our story?

"Our own experiences of conversion and calling contain promises for those around us who do not yet know Christ's mercy."⁶ God has placed your story as the human link between the world and the gospel story. You will be the first Bible that some people will read. You have a story to tell. The question is, will you tell it?

When my cousin asked me if my church preached against Mormonism, I responded by saying, "Let me tell you my story." The part I thought my relatives might connect with was my relationship with my father. The oldest of four children, he had the reputation for being a bit on the wild side, especially by Mormon standards. He left Utah to go to Harvard medical school to become a surgeon, and his two younger brothers followed suit.

As the youngest child and only boy, I grew up feeling like I was the apple of his eye. I was extremely proud to be his son. Then in college the day came when I felt the call to follow Christ, taking my life in a new direction. My father received this news as a grave disappointment. A wall went up between us for twenty years as neither one of us was able to talk about my decision. Although I could not articulate my emotions to him, I prayed fervently for him to come to know Christ. Yet, for years it all seemed in vain, as not even the loss of our first two children or the subsequent miraculous gifts of three daughters brought any closeness to our relationship.

At the age of eighty-two his carotid artery became severely blocked and he was on the verge of a fatal stroke. One of my close friends was a cardiologist, so I invited dad to come for treatment in the Bay Area. He received first class care and expertise from surgeons, nurses, and our friends. The surgery was a success, and after this near encounter with death I watched his heart soften. The following week he recuperated in our home. Time pressures began to mount, as I had the responsibility to prepare for our church's annual men's conference on the following weekend. Our speaker was Michael Green, the gifted evangelist from England. I gave my father the option of flying home or joining me on the retreat. To my amazement, he asked to join me at the conference. The surprises didn't end there. I watched him make new friends, sing Christian hymns, and laugh in fellowship and dialogue with Michael. In the final moments of the conference, Michael was not about to let the divine opportunity pass. He took the initiative, and in a private encounter led my dad to Christ. I'll never forget that moment when I walked into his room. He held out his hand to me, and with tears in his eyes said, "I just accepted the Lord." This was the first time I ever saw my father's tears.

As I finished sharing my father's story, no one could speak. Later, I approached my uncle and said, "I forgot to tell you what I do." He looked at me with tears in his eyes and said, "No, I know what you do," and gave me a powerful embrace, the kind fathers reserve for their sons.

My Father Remembered

O Father, you heard the cry of a boy,
who first learned to weep over his father.
When he sat silent in the face of love,
you put his tears in a bottle,
and hid them.

Years later you called him to Moriah,
but he thought not in vain,
if the sweet scent would
place the Son in the father's heart.

He descended the mount
clung to his father,
and looked into his face
but saw only silence.

The boy went into the desert to forget.
He sang in the cave of Adullam;
there he found men,
the discontent and fatherless.

They grew strong together,
and became his mighty men of renown,
he loved them,
they would be his father.

In all his travels,
the son thanked his Father,
for such a wound,
that forged this new family.

But whenever he returned to Ziklag
under the darkness of the night,
and heard his daughters cry, "Daddy,"
he knew he could not forget.

Then God remembered the boy,
and visited him with his father,
"Take now your father,
the one whom you love,
and journey to the land of Moriah."

They journeyed quietly up the mountain,
the father asked,
"Behold the fire and the wood,
but where is the lamb?"
The son was silent.

Then he raised his eyes,
and heard them singing,
all the men of renown,
with the lamb upon their shoulders.

Those thousand eyes,
broke into the father's heart,
the father wept, took the lamb,
and became a son.

O Father, how great are your wonders!
You heard the cry of a boy
and kept his tears in a bottle.
I shall never forget.

1 Mark Miller, *Experiential Storytelling: (Re)Discovering Narrative to Communicate God's Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 41.

2 Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 143.

3 Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 133.

4 C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography, Volume 1, The Early Years 1834-1859* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), 55.

5 Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 154.

6 Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 154.