

"Grace Increased All the More"

"14 We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. 15 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. 16 And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. 17 As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. 18 For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

21 So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? 25 Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin." (Romans 7:14-25)

In one of the ancient Jewish wisdom books called the Wisdom of Sirach, the following words are written:

"14 When, in the beginning, the Lord created human beings, he left them free to do as they wished. 15 If you want to, you can keep the Lord's commands. You can decide whether you will be loyal to him or not....20 He has never commanded anyone to be wicked or given anyone permission to sin." (Sirach 15:14-16,20 GNT)

We are currently studying Romans and Paul, the author of the book, knew how God's commands were given to man as it is described here. And he knew that the requirements of these commands were correct. But Paul knew about another truth, which is that although it may be logical to say that it is up to us to "keep the Lord's commands" and "decide whether you will be loyal to him or not", we as humans do not have the power to obey this logic. How did Paul discover this truth? He discovered it the moment he saw his own heart under God's light.

There are things we know we should do but fail to do. There are things we know we shouldn't say but we let our tongue slip. There are things we know we shouldn't do but end up doing, even if we know the price we must pay.

The Jews claimed that when we are tempted to sin, wisdom and reason can help us overcome

these impulses. They claimed that we will be safe as long as we devoted ourselves to studying the Bible and that the law will preserve us from the sinful desires of our hearts. But what Paul wrote in the passage we read earlier calls this claim into question. He says that although he knows what is good, he does not have the power to carry it out.

As one who clearly knew his own inability to do good, Paul described himself in the following way: "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 Timothy 1:15).

In another translation, Paul calls himself the "chief" of sinners. With all his accomplishments, no one would have argued if he called himself the chief of evangelism, chief missionary to the gentiles, chief of the church in Corinth, or chief scholar of the law. Yet he mentions none of these accomplishments in this passage but instead says that he is the chief of sinners. Of all the sinners in the world, he considered himself the worst.

Paul wrote this in a letter to his close disciple Timothy, and in another verse he wrote about himself saying "I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man" (1 Timothy 1:13).

In the book of Acts, we see how Paul once persecuted and made murderous threats against the Christians of the early church, raiding their houses and throwing them in prison. So we know that in this passage, Paul was referring to the time of his life when he was a persecutor of the church.

And if we consider how Paul was in the past, we may be led to think that he was referring to his past when he wrote Romans 7. But it has also been suggested that he was actually writing about his present state and this has been the subject of much debate.

There are differing views regarding this, but when we read verse 22 of chapter 7, Paul is saying "in my inner being I delight in God's law", and we can tell that he already had a proper understanding of the purpose of God's law and knew the delight of obeying that law. Therefore it appears that this confession of his inner conflict was written after his conversion.

Also we can see that Paul's statement in Romans 7 is not written in past tense but in present tense. This suggests that at the time Paul wrote this, he had already come to faith and surrendered his life to Christ, so he was writing about his current spiritual state, and as he saw these things within him, he honestly saw himself as the chief of sinners. Before coming to faith in Christ, he was ignorant of the fact that he is a sinner, but now that his sins have been forgiven through Christ, he became clearly conscious of the sinful nature within him, and because of this he called himself the chief of sinners.

There is a great amount of risk in making this kind of confession. Some may perceive it as a sign of humility, but at the same time it could paint a negative picture of the person making the confession.

But the truth is that if we were to take an honest look at ourselves, we can all relate to what Paul is saying. Paul wrote about the inner conflict that we all carry within our hearts. What he wrote about is something that most of us would rather keep hidden.

You know what is good, but you do the evil you do not want to do, as if you are being controlled. You want to love but cannot love. You want to forgive but cannot forgive. You want to stop, but continue to do it.

It is this reality that Paul wrote about. "For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Romans 8:18-19). Are any of you experiencing the same inner conflict right now?

We know the right thing to say; we know the right thing to do; but at the critical moment, we don't have any strength within to put it into action. In those moments, we know what Paul is talking about when he says "I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do...I keep on doing".

We should be grateful that Paul left us with this confession in Romans 7. If it were not for Paul's honest words in Romans, we would probably be living an unhealthy Christian life that is full of hypocrisy, trying to cover up this inexplicable thing within us. In order for our hearts to be healed and set free, we must first allow God's light to shine upon us and reveal the true nature of our hearts. Some people recognize this inner conflict, while others spend their entire life without even being aware that it exists. And just like Adam and Eve did after the fall, they spend their life blaming everything but themselves while failing to recognize their own sinful nature.

Because Paul was acutely aware of the sinful nature within him, he called himself the chief of sinners. He came to this self-awareness because he did not shy away from looking at the true nature of his heart.

When we consider these things that Paul wrote about himself, some of us may perceive him as a miserable person and feel pity for him. There must have been many prestigious positions and honors that he could have achieved if he chose to. Since his youth, Paul was educated by the highest regarded religious teacher of the time so someone like him could have counted himself as one of the elite. But in his letter to his closest disciple Timothy who was like a son to him, he identifies himself as the "worst" of sinners.

Furthermore, it is said that among all of Paul's letters, his letters to Timothy were the last letters he wrote near the very end of his life, and he wrote these words during his imprisonment in Rome while being conscious of his own martyrdom. It would make sense if he wrote about all his achievements and accomplishments, and how much respect he has earned among the people. But in his final years, the title Paul gave himself was "chief of sinners", and we can't help but think he had the saddest ending to his life.

But he assures us that this was not the case for him and says in Romans 5:20, "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more". This was the truth behind his statement that he is the worst of sinners. As the worst of sinners, he saw how God's grace and mercy toward him was ever-increasing.

What exactly is God's grace? It is the fact that we are loved by Him even though we do not deserve to be loved. It is to be loved without any conditions. What we call love amongst ourselves is usually conditional. You may love someone because they provide you with something. Then that someone is no longer the object of your love because they no longer act favorably towards you. This is the what we typically refer to as love. But God's love is unconditional. This unconditional love of God is what we call grace. And the greatest expression of this grace is found in the cross. When Jesus was crucified, do you think there was a sign below Him that read "salvation through Christ is only available to those who have lived upright"? No, Jesus' cross offers salvation to anyone and everyone. There are no rigorous tests that we must pass to receive this salvation.

So why were we saved through grace to begin with? Paul gives us the answer in 1 Timothy 1:16 where he says "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".

Jesus pours out His abundant grace and displays His unlimited patience towards even the worst of sinners. And His abundant grace is poured out on us not only for our sake, but for those who will come to faith by seeing His grace displayed in us and be encouraged through our example.

As we can see in how God used people like Peter and Matthew, God did not entrust the important mission of spreading the Gospel to those who were particularly famous or had status and honor in society. So what kind of people did God use to spread the Gospel into the world? They were the ones who identified themselves as the "worst of sinners". This was because they were the ones who knew the most about the abundance of God's grace. They were the ones who truly knew how much they were loved by God. Ever since then, the Gospel has continued to be proclaimed and advanced through people like them who know the abundance of God's grace.

God's plans for us are beyond our wisdom and understanding. We spend our days trying hard to increase our sense of self-worth. We want others to acknowledge us so we strive to be better

than the rest. But in this kind of competitive world, God wants us to live in response to His grace and be able to say "I am the worst of sinners, but God's abundant grace overflows within me".

In Luke chapter 7, we read the story of the sinful woman that came to Jesus as He was having dinner at a Pharisee's house, and she wept near Jesus' feet and as her tears fell on His feet she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When this was happening, the Pharisee who invited Jesus said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39).

Then Jesus turned to him and told him this parable: "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon replied, 'I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.' 'You have judged correctly,' Jesus said" (Luke 7:41-43). Then Jesus turned to the woman and said "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little" (Luke 7:47).

As we see in this passage, the people did not call this woman by her name but only referred to her as "a sinful woman". The woman acknowledged this herself and knew the kind of person she was. Therefore when she came to Jesus she held nothing back and did all she could to show her love for Him. She knew her own sinfulness so what she did was in response to Jesus' immeasurable love and grace toward her, a sinner. In this way God works in our lives through grace.

But when we read this passage we may wonder if this Pharisee was any less sinful before God than this woman. The answer is no, for we are all sinners before God. So in respect to sin, there was no difference between the woman and the Pharisee. The kind of person Jesus is describing here as being forgiven more is someone who is aware of how sinful they really are and is overwhelmed by God's love and mercy for them. Because this woman knew the greatness of God's grace toward her, she did the best she could to show her love for Jesus.

The more we are illuminated by the light and the closer we get to that light, the more we see things that we did not notice before. And the closer we are to the light, the more we feel the warmth of that light. So the closer we get to God, the light of His holiness reveals the dark places in our hearts that we never even noticed. This may be a painful experience. It may make you want to turn away. But the warmth of God's abundant grace will cover the darkness inside of us with love and forgiveness. Because where sin increased, grace increased all the more.

Paul concluded his candid confession in Romans 7 with these words: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

October 29, 2017 "Grace Increased All the More"

Grace, the greatest gift Christianity has to offer, is always there for those of us who know how truly sinful we are. And God will display His grace in us that we may be an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. What really matters is not what kind of life you have lived but how you will live today in response to the love of Christ.

Today I want to ask you, what is your title? You may have a title given to you at your workplace. There may be some of you who in the past have held a high position within society. You may be a rookie salesperson or a homemaker. These are all titles you can be proud of. The title you have is a testament to the hard work you have put in to earn it. But of all the titles in the world, the greatest title we can have is the title of "one who knows the grace of Christ". If this becomes the title that we live by, our lives will be completely changed from that moment.

In the Bible we find thirteens letters written by Paul, and there is a phrase that he wrote in the beginning of all thirteen of his letters. In all of his letters, Paul wrote the following phrase within the first two sentences: "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ".

Grace is the greatest gift Paul received from God, and so the thing he desires the most for us to receive is grace from God.