

“ALMOST TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE” 1 Tim. 1:12-17

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How do you keep your enthusiasm pumped up for something you've had for so long that you've become accustomed to it? Like that dashing, macho, athletic hunk you married who now sports a 44 inch waist and inhabits an over-stuffed threadbare recliner in your den.

There must be a steady infusion of oomph into a marriage, otherwise the sizzle will fizzle.

Even when someone has been incredibly kind and helpful to you, after a while your gratitude begins to lose its glimmer. You can even get accustomed to the kindness of others. I suppose that's the way it is with us humans.

· This typical human foible has profound implications for the centerpiece of our Christian faith— what the Apostle Paul calls *'the glorious gospel of the blessed God.'* This is what Paul said God had entrusted to him. (1 Timothy 1:11)

That's an expression the Apostle used for God's amazing kindness in providing forgiveness of sins and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ our Savior.

This is great news for a lost and hopeless world. But many Christians received this amazing gift of salvation from God long ago. It's still good news for them, but it's also old news. They've become accustomed to it.

We all have this propensity to become lethargic about the gospel of Jesus Christ and to feel flat and empty in the face of this most awesome treasure from God.

Sad to say, the spiritual life of many church folk is in the minor key.

They're alive only because they are not dead.

It's not supposed to be like that! The wondrous truth of God's grace is more than adequate to maintain our spiritual vitality—unless we drift away from the *glorious gospel.*

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the atmosphere that Christians breathe. Without it we suffocate spiritually.

People used to call Abraham Lincoln's political opponent, Stephen A. Douglas, *'a steam engine in britches.'* He was enthusiasm personified.

I can picture the Apostle Paul that way. Paul never got accustomed to what God had done for him.

That kept driving him to spread the *glorious gospel of the blessed God* to people who had never heard it.

· In our Bible text today we read how Paul expressed his amazement that God showed kindness to the likes of him.

12. *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.*

13. *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.*

14. *The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

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.*

16. *But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.*

17. *Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

Why do you think Paul includes this in his pastoral guidelines to the young pastor Timothy? Paul wants to be sure that Timothy never loses his zeal for God's amazing grace in Jesus Christ.

Why would a church celebrate and spread the good news of God's amazing kindness if the pastor is lethargic about it?

My Christian brothers and sisters here at Crossroads, you must expect the man you will call to be your senior pastor to be 'pumped' about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It should be as obvious as a hungry dog's excitement over a fresh, meaty bone. Perhaps that's not the best analogy for a gospel-passion. But the point is that the focus on the bone becomes the dog's consuming passion. All else is secondary.

· We are reading Paul's mail to pastor Timothy, but it's also for every Christian. This is for us too.

The Apostle Paul's remarks in 1 Timothy 1:12-17 suggests **three ways** to be certain that the 'sizzle' does not fizzle in your Christian experience.

- **Give thanks with all your heart**
- **Receive grace with all your mind**
- **Offer praise with all your soul**

I. GIVE THANKS WITH ALL YOUR HEART. 1 Timothy 1:12-13

If you claim Jesus Christ as your Savior, you are implying that God has forgiven your sins and changed you completely from the inside out. The Bible calls you a 'new creation.' (2 Corinthians 5:17)

If God had not done this for us we would be eternally lost. That is the natural human condition of people because of sin.

Christians are supposed to be the most grateful people in the world because none of us deserves God's amazing love.

· The Apostle Paul was deeply grateful:

12. *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.*

13. *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.*

When you get something you deserve because you earned it, you're not overcome with gratitude to anyone.

You may say "thank you," but it's just a polite gesture. You're actually very proud of your achievement,

· What we read in these verses is not politeness.

The Apostle Paul was profoundly grateful because he knew he was completely undeserving.

I read this somewhere: *'Without gratitude God becomes the wallpaper on the room of our experience; always there, but we are not very conscious of Him.'*

Let's be sure we notice what Paul doesn't say in v.12. He doesn't say Christ deemed him intelligent or talented or charming. Christ judged him faithful.

This goes back to verse 11 where he said God entrusted *the glorious gospel* to him. The good news is precious.

If something is valuable, you entrust it to someone who is faithful.

· Before Paul met Jesus Christ in person he had been on a relentless crusade to obliterate the Christian faith.

He blasphemed the name of Jesus and he tried to force Christians to blaspheme (Acts 26:11).

He admits in v.13 that he had been a bully—a tormentor, intimidator, enforcer. Paul had acted like a thug.

When he did those things Paul thought he was doing God a favor by rescuing people from a false religion and forcing them back into Judaism (Acts 22:3-5; 26:9-11).

God showed mercy to Paul because he acted in ignorance and unbelief.

Little children inevitably act out of ignorance. They do wrong while meaning well.

Parents praise little Jimmy for his crayon scribbles on a sheet of paper. It joins his other masterpieces on the refrigerator gallery. Jimmy takes note of their delight and decides to bring them even more joy. If they loved the little drawing on a sheet of paper, they will be overjoyed to see his huge masterpiece on the living room wall..

Before you place your trust in Jesus Christ, all your sins are sins committed in ignorance or in unbelief—just like Paul.

On the cross Jesus asked God to be merciful to those who crucified him. He prayed, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*” (Luke 23:34).

· Some people fear that they are beyond God’s mercy and there is no hope for them. Why? They have sinned so often and so horribly that they don’t see how God could possibly forgive them.

The Apostle Paul shows us here that God’s mercy reaches way beyond our very worst sins.

A Jewish theologian captured this truth when he said, *Do not consider yourself as irredeemably sinning; because God’s will to forgive is even greater than your power to sin.* (Rabbi Dr. Pinchas Lapide)

The Apostle Paul said no one could ever be more deserving of God’s wrath than he. But instead of wrath he received mercy and the privilege of becoming a servant of the very one he had blasphemed.

· At the start of this letter Paul tells Timothy to stay there in Ephesus and lead the church, devoting himself to God’s word, the gospel (1:3; cf. 4:12).

How can you preach the gospel if you’ve never been amazed by God’s mercy? How can you credibly declare *the glorious gospel of the blessed God* if it has never flooded your heart with gratitude?

‘You cannot kindle a fire in any other heart until it is burning within your own.’

I’m sure Paul would insist that no one has any business being a pastor unless his heart is overflowing with gratitude for God’s mercy.

Being a pastor is not a job. It’s a calling. It’s a compulsion.

This should be the attitude of anyone who is a preacher of the good news: “Wow! After what I have done Christ has actually called me to be a pastor!”

It’s right to ask God for a pastor whose zeal for the good news of Christ will be contagious and spread through the church.

II. RECEIVE GRACE WITH ALL YOUR MIND. 1 Timothy 1:14-16

Paul was overwhelmed by God’s mercy. It stirred him with heart-felt gratitude. But it was more than emotion.

Why is God so merciful to undeserving sinners like all of us? We must settle this in our minds.

It's because God's heart is kind beyond all measure. God withholds from us the wrath we deserve and lavishes on us the kindness we don't deserve.

This is solid-rock truth, and you must plant your feet firmly on it. Otherwise, you're on a slippery slope.

14. *The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

This is one of the loveliest verses in the Bible.

Literally it reads, *And the grace of our Lord "super-abounded" with faith and love in Christ Jesus.*

· Paul deserved God's heavy-handed wrath. Instead, God threw a party for Paul and gave him lavish gifts of grace and faith and love.

This boggles the mind. But you must capture this mind-boggling truth, because there is not now nor will there ever be a more important truth for your mind to grasp.

By the way, you don't need superior smarts to get your thinker around this awesome truth.

It doesn't take a great mind to be a Christian, but it takes all the mind a man has.

(Richard Raines)

Mindless Christianity is not Christianity at all.

· In my opinion people can easily bypass their brains and still be religious. Religious numbskulls!

Much of what people do in the name of religion makes me wonder what they're thinking. Then I realize they're not thinking.

To experience the fullness of the Christian faith you must embrace this truth with all your mind. It's trustworthy.

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.*

This is bedrock Christianity. This is the basis of our confidence.

It's 'Christianity 101': Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

It is the most important truth for everyone to grasp.

'Some Christians drink deeply at the fountain of truth. Others just gargle.'

Christ came into the world to save sinners. This truth is the essence of the good news entrusted to us. Even the very worst sinner is not beyond Christ's reach.

· Paul's testimony was that he was the foremost (lit. *protos*--chief, first) of sinners. Many years ago one of the saintliest Scottish preachers was Dr. Alexander Whyte, the Principal of New College in Edinburgh. One Sunday he startled the starchy, highbrow congregation at St. George's West Church by saying in very solemn tones that he had discovered that week who was the greatest and vilest and most notorious sinner in Edinburgh. And he was going to name him. A lot of people immediately became visibly very agitated. Then after a moment of awful silence the preacher said, "His name is Alexander Whyte." It was unthinkable in Scottish society that such an august cleric of the Kirk would call himself a sinner.

That's what the apostle Paul said about himself. And that's what every pastor, preacher and Christian leader must confess. Otherwise he has no business speaking about God's mercy and amazing grace.

D.L. Moody said, "I have had more trouble with myself than with any other man I have ever met."

I certainly don't deserve God's kindness. What I deserve from God would damn my soul to hell.

We must experience that special sense of awe that comes with grasping the extravagance of God's grace.

16. *But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.*

Paul was the 'poster boy' of divine grace.

Paul was living proof that God can save anyone, no matter how far down into the muck of sin they might have sunk.

That's what motivated Paul to tell the world there is hope for everyone by faith in Christ. This is the truth of the greatness of God's grace that we must grasp with all our minds.

III. OFFER PRAISE WITH ALL YOUR SOUL. 1 Timothy 1:17

Have you ever been spitting mad at God? Some people curse God because bad things have happened to them. So they decide God has it in for them.

They've embraced the cockeyed notion that if God cares for them, he won't allow them to suffer or struggle.

If that has happened to you as a Christian, then you've allowed something to become more important than God's amazing grace.

This is not easy to say. You may be going through an ordeal that would test any Christian's trust in God.

· When the Israelites were about to cross the Jordan River to face challenges the like of which they'd never met before, God told his people through Moses to love the Lord their God with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their strength (Deuteronomy 6:5).

That's passionate adoration. God never said it would be easy, but it is necessary.

· In his own words this is what Paul called for.

17. *Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

Paul addressed God as "King."

God is infinitely greater than any earthly potentate.

· God our King is eternal. God is beyond any limits of time.

· God is invisible.

God doesn't show up in a spectacular way every so often just to reassure us.

Jesus Christ is *the image of the invisible God* (Colossians 1:15) Jesus has shown the world what God is like.

· The Lord God is the only God. All other powers and authorities in the universe are subject to him, including Satan who during this age is tyrannizing the earth. God alone will receive honor and glory forever and ever.

· In a world that is temporarily the dark domain of the devil, God has brought his kingdom to us through the presence and work of Christ.

When we speak of being "saved," we mean that in Christ we are saved by God from the devil's tyranny and enter into the kingdom where Jesus Christ is Lord. That's where we belong.

Paul writes this to the church in Colossae, *'He (God the Father) has rescued us isfrom the domain of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of his beloved Son,'* (Colossians 1:13)

In many parts of the world the fear of supernatural powers terrorizes people. Fear drives them to offer sacrifices; they wear amulets and consult witch doctors to ward off curses and hexes.

Do they express adoration to their gods of wood and stone? Not at all; they live in fear. They try to placate them.

This doesn't just happen out there among animists in remote jungles. It happens in civilized America. Every week religious people traipse to church or to confession, hoping it will spare them God's wrath. The reason they go to church is because they have a nagging fear that something bad might happen if they don't. It's fear, not adoration that draws them.

· But Paul delights in God and shows us how to praise God here in verse 17,. We see a similar outburst of adoration to God further on in this letter, *God the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.* (1 Timothy 6:15, 16)

Passionate adoration as our response to the wonder of God's amazing kindness should be a normal part of our lives.

We should give God the same place in our hearts that He holds in the universe. The central place.

That will keep the 'sizzle' in your Christian life.

Do you have an up-to-date sense of awe at the kindness God has lavished on you, because you know you don't deserve it?

· Have you been afraid that God is may be selective about who receives his mercy, and that you would never be in line for it? I hope you now see that God's grace isn't rationed sparingly; it's lavished extravagantly?

· Paul was so acutely aware of his sin that he was convinced no one was worse than him. He couldn't get over the fact that God would actually save him. Do you have that amazement?

· Do you worship God passionately because you love him wholeheartedly, not because you're afraid of his wrath?