

The Worst Sinner

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[0 : 00] Okay, for a little while this morning we're going to look back at the passage that Anne read for us from 1 Timothy chapter 1.

So this is a letter to a young church leader in Ephesus called Timothy, and it's from the apostle Paul.

And that's the context of how that letter became part of inspired Scripture. It was given by God, not just to that church, but to all churches, to us as well today as it's the living Word of the living God. And last week I think Corrie was looking at truth and doctrine and truth and how truth was linked very powerfully to love.

So he was saying that truth is defined in the first section really, the truth. God's truth is defined by love, and it's love that's defined by God because God is love.

[1 : 05] So God is the author of love, God is love. And that was a really important, that's a really important thing as a foundation for us this morning as we are thinking about this next passage here.

Because if your understanding of what truth is, is purely factual. If it's kind of simply objective reality, and if it doesn't impact on your heart and doesn't change your heart, then can I say it's hopeless truth.

It's not God's truth, and God's truth is truth revealed. If your determination of what truth is, and if mine is such that it allows us to remain unchanged at the core of our being, in our heart, in our very...

What makes me me? What makes you you? If truth doesn't change us, if it allows us to remain self-righteous or constantly complaining about life or suffering, or other people complaining about other people, if it justifies a deep hatred towards people who are not like me, those who are different from me, those who disagree with me, those who don't look like me, or those who I might regard as my enemies, then it's scandalous truth.

It's not genuine truth. It's false. It's destructive. It's a lie. It is not God's truth. If you as a Christian, if I as a Christian have been a Christian or a believer for 20 years, and we... or more, and we kind of...

[3 : 00] We're proud in that we say we haven't changed over these 20 years. If our knowledge of Jesus Christ hasn't changed us over 20 years, or over 10 years, or over five years, or over five months, then there's something that we're not grasping about the reality of Christ's truth.

If Christ for you is distant and makes no impact on your life or your character, then there's a door closed that should be opened.

And it's important to think again. To think again what truth is and who truth is and what difference Jesus makes in your life, because as we saw last week, above everything, God's truth is incarnate. God's truth is revealed most powerfully and most strongly in a person, in the person of Jesus Christ. He makes that remarkable claim in John 14, an unbelievable claim.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. Nobody comes to the Father except through me. That's a statement that changes everything. It's an outstanding and remarkable statement that eyeballs us and makes us think about what truth is.

[4 : 16] That's his claim. That is what Jesus says. And the outworking of Jesus as truth, I think we find in verse 15, which we read, this saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst.

That is the outworking of truth. That is why Jesus Christ came. And it's a trustworthy saying. There are five trustworthy sayings in the epistles here, in the pastoral epistles that Paul uses. We can look them up differently.

This is, it says, this is a trustworthy saying, probably a doctrine that had become known in the church. And this is what he says here, that if Jesus is truth and if truth is love, the love looks like

Jesus coming in to the world to save sinners.

And that's the goal of his truth. And so we see an outworking of love in that, you know, Jesus' own description of love. Love is love while it starts with loving God, doesn't it?

[5 : 34] And that means a change of heart. Matthew 22, love the Lord your God with all your heart, so strengthen mind. And then it involves loving your fellow believers, your neighbors yourself, change of heart.

And also Matthew 5 in the Sermon in the Mountains says it means loving your enemies, change of heart. It's a, it's a, it's a defined love. It's a love that he expresses and shows us and is a love that we need to receive from him because it doesn't come naturally to us.

And we see that in no one more clearly than Paul himself, who goes on to explain the truth explosion in his life, how his life was changed so dramatically when he met with, what did he meet with?

Did he meet with a philosophy? Did he meet with a passage of Scripture? No, he met with Jesus Christ, the risen Savior.

He met with truth incarnate on the road, that famous road to Damascus experience. And he is a great example of the revolution that truth brings into our lives and into our hearts.

[6 : 48] He's a tense example of the power of God's love and the power of grasping what truth does for us and what truth changes in us. He's a kind of organic template of the gospel of what it means to be a Christian.

I want to look at what he says just for a few minutes this morning. And he argues that there was no one worse than him, that he was the worst person you could ever imagine in this world.

Verse 15 he says, you know, of whom the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ overwhelmed for me in faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

The saying is trustworthy and deserves full exception that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners of whom I am foremost. They'll formally go back to, I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent opponent.

The worst of sinners, Paul recognizes himself before God. You probably don't get more evil than Paul or as he was called Saul before he met with Jesus.

[7 : 54] He himself was blinded. But he was blinded by the truth, at least as he saw it. He thought he was doing God's will. He thought he was being obedient to God because he wasn't listening and he was blinded to the gospel and to the love of God.

He was immaculately self-righteous. He would have been first in church every single week. He would have been right in the front row and he would have a Bible open and he would be lapping up the truth.

He kept all the religious rules that needed to be kept. He sought to be good before God, certainly outwardly anyway, but what becomes clear is that inside he was very bitter.

He was a fanatical zealot out to destroy Christianity. So maybe he was the worst sinner who ever lived because if he succeeded none of us would have been sitting here today.

He was out to crush that sect as he sought. He was out to destroy and to deny the reality and the importance of Jesus Christ. He was a bigoted persecutor, a murderer.

[9 : 02] He had an angry, hateful heart and he was bent on annihilation, genocide of a religious minority.

He raged and he hounded the church. He wanted to strangle this and suffocate this fledgling family of God who were bringing the good news to the lost who are sharing God's love and God's truth.

Maybe there was no one ever quite so blind as Paul. Was he the worst sinner of all time? Who knows? But certainly subjectively he felt that. He felt that there couldn't be anyone worse even if maybe objectively, well that's up to God to reveal.

But God's light blinded him on that road to Damascus, physically if not spiritually because for the first time he could see, he could see the truth of what he was doing.

He recognized there must have been something remarkable even in the voice of Jesus, even in his meeting with Jesus that radiated not judgment but love and forgiveness.

[10 : 14] It must have been utterly powerful for him because we don't have a great deal of information but to see that he was not going to be damned by his meeting with Jesus but he was going to be redeemed and saved and forgiven.

And what he did see was the motives of his own heart so that he can't imagine that there would have been anyone worse than him. So we see that he thinks in his life there's no one worse as he comes face to face with the truth.

He meets the truth in Jesus. And the remarkable thing is that Christ came to him. The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with a faith in love in Jesus Christ.

And Christ came into his life and into his experience. Christ met with him so that Christ exposed him that he was persecuting Christ, not Christians.

He was crushing truth, not defending it. He was living his own version of that truth because he was number one. And in effect he was doing the devil's work for him.

[11 : 26] Hate was blinding him. There was no love in his heart for God. And he heard Christ question him. That divine voice is really important.

So also, maybe we should have read that testimony back in Acts. So also, why do you persecute me? Now that's really important, that testimony, because it's recorded in Acts as an event, but twice later on in Acts, it's also repeated by Paul himself.

It was a hugely significant reality for him, his meeting with Jesus Christ, because he repeats it in front of various authorities when he's being on trial.

He tells them about Jesus Christ that he met with light and love and truth, that he was found out, he was exposed, the light of Christ touched his heart, but he was forgiven.

It was truth like no other. And he put his faith and his trust in Jesus. It all clicked for him. This became his saviour, his defender, not his detractor, and there was an unbelievable change in his life, a tremendous change from that moment on.

[12 : 42] Truth changed him. He became thankful, we're told in verse 3, in verse 12, I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord.

And he has this great sense of thankful. He was a strong guy. He was a tough guy. He was a leader, leading men to persecute and murder others.

But he thanked God for God's strength to him because he realised that though he was tough and macho, he was weak and empty spiritually.

And he was humbled by this living God as he received mercy. You know, you've got to be humbled to receive mercy. We all have to be humbled to receive it. And he had been a proud man.

He confesses his ignorance that he did what he did in ignorance and unbelief, though he at that time thought he was really intelligent and well read and understanding of the truth.

[13 : 41] And so grace overflows to him because he senses that he's undeserving as he sees a blasphemer, a persecutor, a violent man. And that's replaced by faith and love and by joy in the living God.

And he moves from being stubbornly opposed to being a worshipper in the living God. And he sees Christ's victory.

Christ displays his perfect patience and an example of those who are to believe in him for eternal life in verse 16. God takes this worst of all sinners.

The truth transforms him and gives him the greatest task. Can you imagine? The one who went to destroy the church becomes the apostle to the Gentiles to grow the church, to change the world.

And he recognizes that God is incredibly patient in doing that. God displayed his patience. Now, there's difficulty there, isn't there?

[14 : 48] Because there were martyrs, there were people that were stoned and killed before Saul met with Jesus.

Suffering was there, injustice was there, sadness was there. And in God's timing, it was allowed to happen. Now, there's great mystery in all of these things and I don't pretend to have any answers.

But he does say that it allowed Christ to display his perfect patience as an example to those who are to believe that the reason Christ doesn't return today in the midst of all the confusion and darkness we face is because he wants more people to come, to know and love him and be redeemed by his grace.

Christ's victory and Christ's glory. He speaks there about the Christ that he was destroying in the most remarkable terms, doesn't he, when he speaks of them and he speaks of Christ as the King.

The King, what does he say? The King of all ages, immortal, invisible, the only God to God be glory and honor forever and ever.

[16:05] And it reminds us of what he says in Colossians 1, where he says that Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the one through whom the world was created and the one who came to redeem the world.

He's incompatible. So for Paul, Jesus isn't a martyred religious leader and he mustn't be for you and I as believers. He's not some great character from the past that we can have moral lessons from and we can learn to be good and nice and holy, this is the living God, the eternal, immortal, invisible God made flesh who reveals his truth and who's nailed to a cross willingly and voluntarily. Death doesn't take him. He gives himself to death because he's paid the price for our sins and is raised on the third day to life so that we can live and we can know that victory ourselves. It's remarkable that the truth is in essence hugely personal. It is God. And as we meet with God, our lives will be changed.

As we meet with God in Christ, as we give ourselves to Him, our lives will be changed. So there's this passage where Paul is kind of unpacking what it is to believe and what it means to believe in Jesus and the difference truth makes.

[17:30] But what on earth does it mean for us? What does it mean in our lives to take this message and apply it into our own circumstances? One or two things just as we draw towards a conclusion.

God's truth, the truth of God in His Word will always convict us in our hearts. It will convict us always.

He talks about in verse 19, holding faith and a good conscience because God's truth will deal with us at that level, a conscience level, not conscious, but a conscience level.

And His truth will expose to us that we are sinners. And that's humbling for us when we meet with Jesus Christ, God through Jesus Christ. And our testimony will, at different times, surely will sometimes think the same as Paul.

I'm the worst of sinners. There's no one quite like me. I'm glad people can't see my life on the screen. I'm glad they can't see my heart. Glad they can't see my motives.

[18:37] I'm glad they can't see how I trip up and fall and fail and all the wrong motives that are in my soul. We may see ourselves sometimes like Paul is the worst of sinners, but that's not a bad thing because the gospel is about getting into our heart.

It's letting his light shine in there and God's presence will slam our conscience. It will slam our conscience because of who He is and because of His holiness.

And it will place our heart in tatters before Him. His truth is truth and it's not cheap.

And God will not allow us to just park the bus at the foot of the cross and leave it there. And He'll not let us just make our own definitions.

Well, I can cut that out and we can leave this because He is truth and He's truth incarnate. He doesn't allow us to wallow in our pride or our divisive spirit or our angry heart or our careless lack of consideration for Him or for other people.

[19:49] He doesn't allow us to remain self-righteous or disdainful of our friends or even our enemies. But listen, thank God for that.

Thank God that He loves us enough to give us a conscience that exposes our heart. It doesn't necessarily expose it to everyone. Thank God for that. But as we deal with Him eyeball to eyeball, His love and His grace will expose where we need to see the change that only His power and glory and grace can change us and forgive us and renew us.

So maybe you're not a Christian here this morning, but you're searching for the truth. You're looking for truth. Can I encourage you not simply to focus on something philosophical or merely objective, existential and not just be content with something that you think is solid but safe, you know, that leaves you untroubled, that leaves you without a pricked conscience, without being exposed because God's truth strips us naked.

That's His truth. That's what it will do. Why? Because grace is amazing. Because grace is absolutely amazing.

In verse 14, He says, It was the grace of our Lord that overflowed for me when with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

[21:30] Grace is amazing. Grace transformed immediately Paul as he accepted and saw that despite who he was, Christ Jesus was the one who had paid the price for all of that and who had in his justice provided a way forward that met also his great love.

Because if we never see that, if we never see in our hearts who he is and his holiness, we're never really going to, we're never going to enjoy and receive nor find grace amazing.

It'll be plain dull ornary grace, grace that we can toss aside, grace that's not that important, grace that may sound nice and may appeal at some levels.

But our journey to wholeness requires that deep-seated relationship with Jesus where He pours out His forgiveness as He exposes our need and our hearts.

And He does so because He's never miserly. It's not just pipettefuls of grace that He tips onto us. He lavishly overflows His grace into our hearts and into our lives.

[22 : 44] And it therefore changes our understanding of His holiness and also of His character and our priorities towards Him. He welcomes us into His divine family, into His company.

He shows us step by step, day by day, what we were, who we were created to be, the purpose, the love, the hope, the trust, the goodness. He deals with our inner scrooge.

He helps us to see that giving is better than getting. And He helps us through the impossibilities of suffering, which we don't have answers to but which by faith and trust we believe He will take us through because He knows.

And we have an incomparable future in Him. And He comes for you. And in Christ, if you're a Christian for a long time or maybe not a long time, you can be assured that He has come for you. This is He came for Paul. He's come for you to reveal and to show His grace. So God's truth convicts us, but His grace is amazing. And we are called to hold on to that truth.

[23 : 54] Verse 18 and 19, particularly, He speaks to Timothy and He says, holding faith in a good conscience. Where the truth in this warfare that you're in, and He exposes the shipwreck of others in the leadership or who want to be leaders, Himinias and Alexander, who have rejected and turned away from that truth.

And there's a really, I think there's a really important picture there for us all is that picture of shipwreck. You know, if you reject Christ as your Savior, I know there's short term, we think there's short term gain of doing that sometimes because it's tough, you know, self-denial and following Jesus.

And, you know, we remain Lord over our own lives and that can give us a sense of significance and importance. But if we drift from the gospel of Jesus or reject Him, or as Christians, if we're tempted to drift from the obedience of love and following Jesus, then basically Paul's saying it's a car crash in modern Barons.

Shipwreck. Your life will be a shipwreck because of that spiritually. And that was what was going to happen to Himinias and Alexander. They rejected the core truth.

His second epistle speaks about Himinias who rejected the resurrection, or at least He thought that the resurrection had already taken place and there was spiritual truths and myths that people had to know about.

[25 : 32] He seemed, these both of them seemed to be keeping Jesus out of their hearts. They seemed to have ignored the need for a good conscience. A good conscience didn't matter.

Well, it doesn't really matter. You can believe what you believe. And we kept Him out of our hearts and of our conscience. And they were handed over, as it were, to a place of without protection, a place where Jesus Christ's love wasn't in order to expose that and to bring them back, we would call that excommunication probably today, in the hope that they would see that turning away from Christ is to shipwreck your faith.

Timothy had this significant and important apostolic authority to remind that early church of the danger of just rejecting Jesus or just throwing Him out as if it didn't really matter.

And so we are called today, Jesus calls us to hold on, just as Paul encouraged Timothy to hold on to a good conscience and to hold on to the faith, to the truth, to the doctrine, to the teaching of Jesus Christ.

Now we need to hold on to that in our own conscience, because sometimes it's tough, isn't it? It's very difficult to see yourself in the mirror, especially in the mirror of Scripture.

[27 : 02] But we never stop there, because we look into the face of Jesus and see forgiveness and wholeness. And we must see that for ourselves and also for us as a church, we need to fight for the truth.

And walking away, maybe today, you think that walking away will be easier and it may seem easier. And in many ways it is easier, at least in the short term, sometimes.

But you're walking away from the person of Jesus, walking away from His beauty, from His forgiveness, from His protection, from His love, your grieving, quenching, resisting His Spirit. And I would encourage you if you're tempted that way today, and who of us haven't been, and who of us aren't at different times in our lives, just go back to Jesus. Go back to that place where you first believed.

Go back to the simplicity of meeting with Jesus. Deal with all the complications and difficulties. Put them aside for a while. I'm not saying, love me, love me, I'm thick. I'm just going back to sort of not thinking.

[28 : 16] We take our deepest thoughts and we bring them to the person of Jesus and we wrestle through Him, wrestle with Him through these challenges that we face because God is love.

And that's the doctrine that we need to stick with, that we love Him, that we love one another and that we love our enemies. There's not another truth in the world that sees that because there is no other truth than God.

This God who is the King of all ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be glory.

That is the truth that we have. That's the truth that will change our lives. Paul is a fantastic example that no one is too bad to come to Jesus Christ for rescue and redemption in eternal life.

Isn't it sad? There's lots of, maybe our friends and colleagues and people around us who say, oh, if I went to church, the ceiling would come down, I'm just a bad guy. Yeah, you know, Jesus will not accept me because if we somehow have got everything turned upside down, that's exactly what we are all like, every single one of us.

[29 : 32] And there wouldn't be a church roof in the world if that were any different. So Paul's a fantastic example and reminder to us of what truth does for us in our hearts.

And I guess, I'm an Aesop and Alexander are also a great example that you can never think you're good enough not to need Jesus and can drift from Jesus without a cost and without experiencing unimaginable loss.

So Jesus is presented in His Word and it's Jesus we focus on in your struggles, in your battles, in the difficulties, in the questions, in the fears, in the things we don't understand.

We come to Jesus and we meet with Jesus. We have our Damascus road experience every day as we come to His feet in faith and trust. Let's pray.

Father God, we ask and pray you would help us to see more clearly who you are that we would focus more clearly on who you are and that the length of time between your life on earth, your death and resurrection would not change anything because you yourself are out with the scheme of time and you are ever present and we come before you today and we seek forgiveness, we seek honesty, integrity.

[30 : 56] We ask that we would live in the light of what Jesus has done and allow you to wrestle with our hearts. We know there's so many things that we keep, we have no go areas, we have no entry signs.

Lord help us to deal with them. However difficult, however challenging to us, to me, to every individual here, may we be those people who recognize that God knows our hearts and He, it's not that we confess because we tell Him what He doesn't know, but we confess because He wants us to recognize a self-honesty and a need for Him.

And may we know amazing grace, may it be reflected in the way we act as a church, the way we speak to each other, the way we share coffee and tea together, the way we speak to visitors, the way that we respond when things go wrong and when our fellow Christians let us down, may we love our neighbors and may we love our enemies in a world which hates its enemies and in a world which makes that friendship circle smaller and smaller and smaller.

Lord help us to love those who don't look like us, think like us, act like us, believe like us and to do it with self-sacrificial commitment. We ask in Jesus' name.

Amen.