

Redeeming the Past

1 Tim 1:12-17

1 Tim 1:12-13

- Sometimes Paul writes this way – where he pulls back the curtain and talks about himself frankly.
- These parts of the Bible are invaluable. They give us a sense of the man, what leads him to his intense connection to Christ, and where he gets the fuel for his remarkable life of service.
- This is a personal letter to Timothy, and Paul is personal here. Jesus has done something for him that erased the awful things he did before.

- I want us to talk for a few minutes this morning about the past. We all have a chapter – maybe several – in our lives where we lived for ourselves and did things that were wrong. A chapter where we were not right with God, where we chose sin and persisted in it.
- And usually in that period we wrestled with our conscience, because we knew something needed to change but didn't know how to fix it.
- I don't know about you, but I am deeply ashamed of the things I did when I wandered so far from the Lord. And the more I grow in Christ, the more ashamed I am.
- Yet this passage shows us that the healthy way to think of our past is to see it as redeemed by Christ. Jesus has made something out of Paul – a silk purse out of a sow's ear – and that's what he does for all of us.
- Maybe some of us here are not Christians – struggling with those emotions of guilt, tried to redeem your own life but find yourself continuing to relapse – you need to allow Christ to redeem your past. Christians – let this redemption give us new purpose and fuel for praise and service.
- Jesus can redeem our past! Let's think about how.

- Paul is writing to Timothy as he's left him in Ephesus to teach and work with the brethren in that place. The tone of the letter is to give Timothy some ideas of what he needs to focus on and what he does not need to focus on.
- 1 Tim 1:3-7 – Watch out for different doctrine, for myths and endless genealogies, for vain discussion.
- In particular it seems to me that we young preachers have a tendency to get sidetracked into things that are not really that important or are only going to lead to vain discussion. Some things are just not worth talking about.
- But this letter gives Timothy a lot of things that *are* good to talk about – and one of those forms the framework of our text this morning.

- 1 Tim 1:12-17

1) **My past is my fault**

- This jumps off the page. Paul talks about his past with a frankness and honesty, an acknowledgement that is refreshing.
- v. 12-13 – This is what I used to be. Paul doesn't hide it. He may be ashamed of what he has done, but he is not ashamed to say it because it only serves to glorify Christ further.
- I was these things. Paul does not quibble. His words are clear. He had sinned, and his sin defined him.

- To redeem the past, we must come to acknowledge that my past is my fault. Please don't misunderstand me. I don't mean that everything that ever happened in the past is my fault. I don't mean that others didn't influence me, pressure me, tempt me, rejoice in my evil. I don't mean that my environment didn't contribute, that my genes may tend in a certain way. I mean that even when all those things are accounted for, I chose to do wrong. It was my fault. I am guilty.
- We live in a world where this kind of honest taking of responsibility is extraordinarily rare. Where apologies start with I'm sorry but end with explaining the situation. Where people yell at us not to judge them. It is so rare to hear those simple, humble Bible words, "I have sinned." When was the last time you said something like that?
- And this matters—because if my sin is someone else's fault, I won't seek the Lord as intensely. Christ does not forgive me because my failures are someone else's fault—and if I think that, there will be very little reason for *me* to thank him.
- v. 15—Of whom I am the foremost. Paul sees himself as the chief of sinners.
- This doesn't mean there's an actual sinner ranking. He's explaining that this is how he *feels* about his sin—not as trying to make himself feel bad, but as the legitimate shame and disappointment he feels. *My* sins are the worst sins.
- So it is not just about saying the right things about our sins, but about processing our past the way Paul did. I would hazard a guess that if we don't feel this way about our sin, we might be holding back a bit. If we feel our sins are just not that bad—if we compare favorably to others—then we may need to think a little more about what we have done and what it means to God.
- If we don't feel our past needs to be redeemed, the gospel will have little appeal to us.

2) My past is behind me

- We need to take a moment and notice Paul's verb tenses here.
- v. 13—Formerly I was. This is who I used to be. This is not who I am anymore.
- Paul is speaking to an event that happened to him long ago. Christ judged him faithful, gave him mercy, entrusted him with the gospel. What's amazing is that Christ did all of that for him *when he was so unworthy and evil*. The implication is natural—he is no longer that way.
- Timothy would have known that, as a companion of Paul. He knew the kind of man he was when he wrote this was completely different than the blasphemer, persecutor, insolent man.
- But this reminds us that the past can only be redeemed if we repent of it—if we change—if it is behind us.
- Consider if Paul had not truly changed. He could not say that he formerly *was* these things—honesty would demand that he said he was still these things. The same Jesus who judged him faithful, appointed him to his service, would have continued to work at cross-purposes. Repentance is Paul's biggest responsibility.
- Paul's example gives us a clear example of what is less clear in our own lives. When we live in sin, we are fighting against God, enemies of God, serving the wrong side. Each step we take into sin is a step away from God. Now with Paul, that's obvious. He was literally persecuting Christians and trying to keep them from serving God. He had to change that to redeem his past—things needed to be different.

- But it is just as true with us. When I continue to live in my sinful relationships, my corrupt speech, my sexual sin, my quick temper, I fight against Christ.
- Those chapters of my past life can only be redeemed if they are closed – if they are past.
- Now – that doesn't mean that I may not still struggle with some of those things, that old man coming back to life – but it does mean that there has been a definitive rejection, change, and growth.

3) My past is not all Jesus sees

- I don't know exactly how to word what I see in this text. It is something powerful and encouraging. Jesus has always seen tremendous potential in Paul – even when he went off the rails and was a violent persecutor of the God he tried to serve.
- v. 12 – because he judged me faithful. Now at that point in time, Paul wasn't faithful – but Jesus didn't just look at where he was at that moment in time. He looked forward to what Paul *could be*, at the heart within Paul, at how Paul would respond if Jesus intervened in the right way to change him.
- And so Jesus judged him faithful and gave him a place in his service, entrusted him with the gospel and the ministry to the Gentiles.
- v. 13 – But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief. Jesus saw something about Paul's motivations. He knew that his heart was sincere, even if severely misguided. His ignorance contributed to the problem, and his ignorance was worsened by his unbelief. He refused to believe, and so he could not hear and learn. He had hardened his heart in unbelief.
- But Jesus gave him mercy anyway, because he knew what Paul could be if this state changed.
- This doesn't mean – that ignorance is bliss. It doesn't mean that we have no hope if we sin knowingly. It means that Jesus saw more about Paul than just his actions, just his past. He saw potential.
- v. 14-15 – In fact, in a broader sense, this is what Jesus came into the world to do – to save sinners. He does not dismiss us bc we have a past – like a background check on a job application. He came to save us from that past, and sees more value in us than just what we have done.
- Sometimes we get overwhelmed by our past – we struggle forgiving ourselves. It may help us to know that God sees more about us than the worst things we've ever done. He sees the whole me – good, bad, ugly. He sees my talents and my weaknesses, my habits, my shining moments, my deep valleys. And he still loves me and has work for me to do.
- In fact, Jesus likely thinks more of us than we think of ourselves. Each one of us has been given special, unique gifts and opportunities that can be used in the service of God and others. So Jesus does not just see someone who has made mistakes, or lived a mess of a life – he also sees someone as they could and can be – and calls into existence the things that do not exist.
- But this idea will also help us when we're thinking about others. We have this stubborn tendency to fixate on the flaws of others – see the speck in their eyes – rather than seeing their good points. Especially if they hurt us, we have a hard time seeing good in them. Maybe we don't like their physical appearance, or their attitude, or some quirk of their appearance. Some people we just don't mesh with.

- But when we think about how Jesus sees them, it helps. He sees potential. What does this person bring to the cause of Christ? If they are not a Christian, what wonderful gifts could they use in his service? What could they be? What could God do through them?
- And even if – at the end of it all – we still have no idea of potential, we can always see them as the one God loved enough to send Jesus to die for. They matter to him, and so they matter to me.

4) **My past is part of a better story**

- At the close of this section, Paul gives an intriguing statement that shows he has thought a lot about what all this means – what Jesus has been doing through him and his story.
- 1 Tim 1:15-16 – I received mercy *for this reason*. There is a point to all this, and the point is beyond simply Paul being saved.
- My story of mercy is an example to others who would come to believe. That is a class of people that includes you and me.
- Paul's story is very personal, and unique to him. Yet in another sense, it is not unique at all. It is exactly what every Christian experiences – wrestling with a past of shame, being found and loved and given mercy by God through Christ, and finding purpose and work through him. It is my story. It is your story.
- Paul is an example to show us that this kind of love, mercy, vision, grace is not just for him. It is for all people who are willing to believe in him for eternal life.
- So he has thought about God's purposes and decided that his past is a part of that story. It seems to me that this is the reason that Paul often preaches (in Acts) about his own conversion – because this incredible changing power *is* the gospel.
- We can handle a little bit of negativity if we know that it is only part of the story. We watch the movie where there is a kidnapping or a tragic event in the beginning bc we believe there will be more to the story. We believe that things can end well, even if they begin poorly.
- What Christ has done is redefine our story. We ruined it in our sin, but in his hands it becomes a better story – a story of new beginnings, forgiveness, redemption, new life. And along the way it becomes not our story anymore, but his story. Our past is redeemed.
- And part of that is a renewed sense of purpose and work.
- v. 11, 12 – Paul has been entrusted with the gospel, appointed to his service. Paul knows what his life is about now, in a way that he didn't before.
- Our past robs us of this. We feel a sense of our innocence being lost, of our own weakness and doubt. We have made a mess, and our life devolves into trying to get rid of our guilt, distract us from that nagging feeling. We don't really know why we're here, so we figure we might as well have a good time – and when we do we feel worse
- But Christ redeems our past – showing us that all that we have gone through can be used to his glory. Our story can impact others, can be an example to them.
- And in the end, we are left to praise him. "I thank him". The grace of our Lord overflowed for me. He displayed his perfect patience in me. To the King be honor and glory forever.

1) My past is my fault

2) My past is behind me

3) My past is not all Jesus sees

4) My past is only part of a better story

- That, friends, is my story too. It is the story of a little boy who grew up growing to church but learned to hate others. Who felt better than everyone around him. Who was present in body but not in spirit in worship to God. Who got mixed up in sexual temptation – in pride – in lying – in gossip – in anger – in materialism – the list goes on. I had lots of help getting there, but it was my fault.
- But God didn't give up on me – he never has. He did the most interesting thing – he sent me a woman who helped me to face myself and my flaws. Who helped me put the past behind me.
- And now he is at work in me, and it is awesome. I see him changing me, and it is not me. If I just continue to learn from him and try to follow him, he makes me grow. I still struggle, certainly. I am far from the man I need to be. But I am closer – and that is his work.
- Now I can help others to know what I know, to be what I am – a disciple, forgiven.

- There is a tremendous difference in one who enjoys attacking, criticizing, and condemning others – and one who humbly acknowledges his faults, weaknesses, and needs – and appeals to others to find the remedy he has.
- “Evangelism is telling other hungry people where you found bread”

- What about your past? Carrying around guilt? Hurt and disappointment? Blaming others? Isn't it time?