

The Pillar (Part 5 of 6)

You Were Made to Make Much of God

1 Timothy 1:15-17

Mark Vroegop

15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. 17 To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim. 1:15-17).

I'm curious how many of you grew up using some form of catechism? For some of you, that may not bring back the most enjoyable memories because, in some cases, it involved long classes or questions that may have seemed a bit dated. I sure hope that is not the experience of everyone because a catechism can be a very valuable and rich teaching tool.

If you have no idea what a catechism is, let me briefly explain what it is all about. A catechism is a summary of doctrine in the form of questions and answers. Typically it was designed to be used for the instruction of children, since it provided clear and concise answers to important matter of the faith. Charles Spurgeon, the famed English preacher in the 1800s, developed one for his congregation because he was convinced that "the use of a good catechism in all our families will be a great safeguard against the increasing errors of our times." Notable examples of catechisms would be The Westminster Longer and Short Catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism, and Spurgeon's Catechism.

A catechism is helpful because it succinctly asks and answers the most important questions in the Bible. Here are a few examples:

Q.14. What is sin?

A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God

Q. 33 What is justification?

A. Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins and accepteth us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

Q. 86. What is faith in Jesus Christ?

A. Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he offered to us in the gospel.

These questions are so important, and the answers are ripe with a clear and concise biblical worldview. But the most famous and perhaps the most important question that the Westminster Catechism asks is the first question:

Q. 1. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

The question and its answer are important because they capture the essence of what life is ultimately about. In twelve words, we have a wonderful summary of why we exist, what is really valuable, and what God is doing.

Clear summaries of great truths can be really helpful.

What is the Aim of the Gospel?

Our text today – Timothy 1:15-17 – is not a catechism, but it summarizes vital truth about God, mankind, and the gospel. After addressing the problems of false teaching and the use of the law (1:3-11), Paul talks about the personal impact of the gospel upon his life (1:12-14). We learned last week about the beauty of God's mercy not just to Paul but to all of us. We saw how grace creates gratitude, worship, and hope. We learned that "the gospel bids us fly and gives us wings."

Verses 15-17 drive this grace theme even deeper. The overwhelming nature of God's grace should make someone ask, "Why would God be this merciful?" Another way to ask the question might be: "What is God up to?" Or: "Why does God save people?"

Some people answer that question by suggesting that God was lonely or that he needed to be loved. Nothing could be further from the truth. Others say that God saved people because human beings have so much intrinsic value or because of how special we are. Now, human beings are certainly valuable; we are made in the image of God. But that is not the reason for God's saving actions.

The goal of salvation, the plan of God in redemption, and the aim of the gospel is to display the glory God. In other words, **God saves people to display his glory**. The chief aim of the gospel is the glory of God, and the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

1 Timothy 1:15-17 gives us three expressions of this truth. The aim of the gospel is 1) to save undeserving sinners, 2) to display his great mercy, and 3) the praise of his name. Let's look at these and consider some implications:

To Save Underserving Sinners

Paul begins this great summary by saying "the saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance..." There are four other times in the Pastoral Epistles that Paul uses this manner of introduction (see 1 Timothy 3:1, 4:9, 2 Tim. 2:11 and Titus 3:8). He uses the phrase to introduce

concise summaries of important truths. It certainly is not a catechism, but it is a great summary of doctrinal truth.

To say that what follows is “trustworthy” and “deserving of full acceptance” means two things. First, Paul is affirming the truthfulness and weight of what follows. This is important news. Secondly, he affirms that this message is worthy of global and wide-spread acceptance. At first you might think Paul is talking about how one should accept this truth. While that is true and right, it is more likely that he is referring to where this truth should be accepted. And his answer is clear: everywhere! In other words, what follows is a truth that is deep and wide. The truth that follows is **the** answer for the **entire** world.

Remember that the message of this book is “guard the truth that leads to life.” And part of the reason why it must be guarded is so that it can be accepted locally and spread globally. Why is this global message tied to the gospel? Why does the Great Commission say “make disciples of all nations”? Is it because the whole world is sinful? While that is true, it is not the ultimate motivation. The need is not the primary reason. The compelling call for the spread of this trustworthy message is the glory of God. In other words, the glory of God is so compelling, so satisfying, so glorious, and so beautiful that it must be global. This message deserves full acceptance.

What is the message? It is the simple, life-changing truth that “Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (v 15). In fifteen words, Paul summarizes the most important and life-transforming truth in the world. In unpacking these words we see that it was Jesus Christ, the son of God, who came into the world. John 1:14 says that the “word became flesh.” In the incarnation, God enters our sinful world and becomes one of us. In itself, that is a remarkable truth. But there is more.

Jesus does all of this in order to “save sinners.” Now we are familiar with these two words, and they sound like they go together. But they really don’t. After all, in light of God’s holiness and glory, sinners are not to be saved; sinners are to be punished, condemned, judged, and banished. And the glory of the gospel is that God not only doesn’t condemn them but punishes his own Son so that those who believe in Jesus can be saved.

The word “saved” come from the word that means to make safe. So it can be translated as deliver, protect, or preserve. But from what? What is a sinner saved from? The answer relates to where this passage is headed. A sinner is saved from God! The beauty of the gospel is that God personally intervenes to save people from himself.

As if this wasn’t enough, Paul adds one more important thing to his statement. He says “of whom I am the foremost.” When he considers the beauty of God’s glory and holiness, and when he thinks about the nature of sinful human beings, one thing stands out: I’m the worst sinner I know. Paul is surely not saying that he has technically sinned more than anyone else. There had to be people who Paul knew were, at least, equally sinful as what he was. Instead, Paul is identifying that his sin, his personal transgression against a holy God is crystal clear to him. He knows how bad he could be. For that matter, he knows how bad he is. Notice that he says “of whom I am the foremost.”

Paul certainly knew that he was a forgiven man and that his past was covered by the blood of Jesus. But he never lost sight of the fact that he is an underserving sinner.

This is the beauty of what the gospel can do. The more you understand about the majesty and holiness of God and the more you understand about the nature of sin, the bigger your sin becomes. And while you might think that this would make you unhappy, the reverse is true. There is great joy in knowing that God has been merciful to awful sinners, and that you are biggest sinner you know.

Probably the person who thought the most about this was Jonathan Edwards. This week I spent some time in his book *The End for Which God Created the World*. Here is what he said:

“God, in seeking his glory, seeks the good of his creatures because the emanation of his glory...implies the...happiness of his creatures. And in communicating his fullness for them, he does it for himself, because their good, which he seeks, is so much in union and communion with himself. God is their good.”¹

God’s aim is to save undeserving sinners and make them eternally happy.

To Display His Great Mercy

The second truth that we find in these verses begins to hint at where all of this is headed. Much of what Paul has talked about since verse 12 has been about himself and God’s grace to him. In verse 16, the lens begins to broaden as Paul explains the bigger plan of God’s mercy. In other words, there is a reason for God’s mercy to Paul beyond his personal salvation. The aim of the gospel is to save sinners to display God’s mercy.

Verse 16 clearly identifies that Paul is quite conscious of the fact that God’s individual saving of him was part of a bigger plan or a larger goal. The aim of God’s deliverance of Paul was not to make much of Paul, but to make much of God.

16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life (1 Tim 1:16).

Paul viewed his past through the lens of the opportunity for some amazing things to take place. Notice the following:

- Paul’s perspective on his past was directly linked to what it said about God. Looking back on his life, he knew that his past was bad. But instead of shamefully wondering what people thought about him, he celebrates what it says about God.

¹ John Piper quoting *The End for Which God Created the World* in *God’s Passion for His Glory – Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishers, 1998), 33.

- Paul's redemption – like ours – is a personal matter for Jesus Christ. It is not a coincidence or by accident that Paul says that it was Jesus Christ who is displaying his perfect patience. This is the first time that Paul talks about his Lord this way. All the other times it is "Christ Jesus." Christianity is a relationship with the person of Jesus.
- Notice the unbelievable grace of being the canvas on which Jesus Christ would personally be displayed. Because of redemption, the followers of Jesus become the conduits through which the world sees the beauty of Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 4:15 we are called "the aroma of Christ..."
- Additionally, we see that Paul views his conversion as a prototype or a model. In effect, he wants people to know that if God could rescue and save him, then God can save anyone. If God has gone this far in redeeming the chief of sinners, he will certainly be gracious to others.
- Finally, the end game here is more believers. Having experienced the grace of God in his life, Paul, like every grace-receiving person, longs for others to experience the same grace. He hopes that his horrible past could become a beautiful piece of evidence that encourages others to have a relationship with Jesus.

When you put this together, it is redemption in its truest sense. A person has been saved from his or her own rebellion, and through their salvation they become the means by which people see how unbelievable God's grace is. This becomes the motivation for personal evangelism. The contrast of who we were and what God did becomes a compelling statement. It becomes a defining reality as to why redeemed human beings are on the earth, and it helps us know how to view ourselves.

Paul captures the same thought in Ephesians 2. Notice the connection between your past, the grace of God, and how you view yourself:

2 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:1-9).

Do you see what Paul is saying here? All of us are horrible sinners – the worst we know. Even in that condition God saved us. But for what purpose? To "show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." And what should be our response? Joyful humility.

The aim of the gospel is to save underserving sinners to display God's great mercy.

To the Praise of His Name

This passage ends with a flourish as Paul breaks into a doxology that reflects the ultimate goal of the gospel: to praise the name of God. Everything leads us to this point. The gospel is not just about saving sinners, nor is it just about displaying God's mercy for the conversion of others. The ultimate aim of the gospel is the glory of God. This is where a right view of salvation and a right view of the church should lead. Biblical soteriology should lead to biblical ecclesiology which should lead to doxology. God saves his church to display his glory. Or, as our title says, you were made to make much of God.

Now the beautiful thing about a doxology is the way in which it lists, in rapid-fire succession, wonderful truths or titles about who God is and what he is like. Notice that there are four descriptions of God verse 17:

- **King of ages** - The word "ages" can also be translated as eternal (NIV, NASB, KJV). The idea presented in this title is that God rules over all the ages. His sovereign control extends beyond the limitations of time. There never was, nor will there ever be, a time when God is not on the throne. He reigns – forever!
- **Immortal** - The word literally means incorruptible such that he is "beyond the ravages of death and decay."² God is untouchable by the things that cause the unraveling of the universe. Everything that we are and everything we know is mortal – filled with the consequences of sin. But God is beyond the reach of corrupting sin. He is immortal.
- **Invisible** - Obviously, this means that God is not able to be seen, but there is more. It means that his glory extends "beyond the limits of every horizon."³ While creation displays his glory (Rom. 1:20) and Jesus is the image of invisible God (Col. 1:15), his glory extends beyond the limits of what we can even imagine. So he's not just invisible; he glory is unimaginable.
- **The only God** - This statement affirms the exclusivity of God as God. There is no one like him. No one compares to him. He has no equal, no comparison, and no rivals. He is THE ONLY God. There is nothing like Him. Isaiah 45:18 says "I am the Lord, and there is no other." This is not like an Ohio State football player saying THE Ohio State –whatever that means. This is THE ONLY God.

Each of these words communicates something about the "otherness" of God. They portray God as being transcendent, incredibly unlike mankind, and far beyond our understanding. God's graciousness has led Paul to bask in the beauty of what God is like. And as he considers all that God has done, his heart is overwhelmed by the beauty of God. God's grace led Paul to God! The good news that God rescues sinners is the gospel of the **glory** of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4).

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1996), 55

³ Ibid

The overflow of God's grace results in praise that sounds like "honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." Augustine said it this way: "Thou has made us for thyself and our hearts find no peace until they find their rest in thee." This is where everything in creation is supposed to lead. Every gift is meant to be a conduit for the sovereign, immortal, invisible, THE ONLY God. In other words, grace – as amazing as it is – pales in comparison to the glory of God. Grace is meant to lead us to God's glory.

Here's how Jonathan Edwards famously stated this truth:

The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams. But God is the ocean⁴.

And this is how Revelation 15:12-13 states this truth:

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" 13 And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!

God saves undeserving sinners to display his great mercy to the praise of his name. God saves you for his own glory.

Don't Live For Shadows!

One statement that Edwards made really hit home with me this week. He said that the good gifts of God are "but shadows...God is the substance." In light of that statement and what we've learned from 1 Timothy today, let me give you implications of these truths under the banner of not living for shadows.

- 1. Sin is an empty promise.** From the very beginning of time, the enemy has offered sinful choices under the promise of more happiness. Satan told Eve, "You will be like God knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:4). Sin always offers promises: "you'll feel loved," "you'll be in control," "you'll feel better," "people will like you," etc. But sin is "falling short of God's glory" (Rom. 3:23); it is an empty promise, a bait and switch that kills and destroys. Don't live for shadows.
- 2. Idols are deadly masters.** Idolatry is simply loving and worshiping anything more or in the place of God; it is something that controls you even though you thought, at first, you controlled it. Idolatry is taking the gifts of God and turning them into practical gods. It is taking the blessings of God and living as if they were ultimate – "exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man..." (Rom. 1:23). It is turning a gift that was

⁴ Piper, 75

supposed to point you to God and using it to make much of you. And in so doing, it kills everything that you were supposed to love. Don't live for shadows.

- 3. Pride is spiritual insanity.** Undeserved grace poured out on horrible sinners should exclude all boasting. The more you understand God and the more you understand yourself, the more amazed you should be that God rescued you, saved you, cleansed you, and restored you. To glory in yourself is to be foolish to the extreme. That is why people will often say, "What was I thinking?!" Pride just doesn't make sense. It is crazy! Don't live for shadows.
- 4. Misdirected joy is eternally unspeakable.** A rejection of the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ is to take greater joy in something else. It is to think you are better than others, to refuse to leave your sinful actions, to believe that you are happier without him, and that eternity without God is not really that bad. Edwards said that the love of God and the wrath of God are both unspeakable.⁵ Do you know what hell is? It is simply God giving you what you want – a godless existence – only to realize that you made an eternally terrible choice. Don't live for shadows!

What is God up to? What is the message of the Bible? What is the meaning of life? Why are you here today? These are all questions that Bible answers clearly and unequivocally. God saves undeserving sinners to display his great mercy to the praise of his name.

He made you to make much of him! And when you understand this, you cannot help but break out into doxology.

20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20-21)

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⁵ Piper, 38