

“SINNERS & SAINTS”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Belleville, IL
By The Rev Rob Dyer
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(transcribed from audio file)

The scripture reading this morning is from the New Testament, 1 Timothy 1:12-17.
Hear what the Lord is saying to us this morning.

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he considered me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience as an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. *NRSVue*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This week I went to the dentist. Now that’s always fun and got my second filling. Over my entire lifetime I’ve only had two fillings. The first one was about ten years ago and up until recently I thought, I think that dentist was just trying to make money off me. I don’t have cavities. I’m not a person who has cavities.

I remember when I was younger going to the dentist. It was a little bit of a game. Let’s see like, okay at the level that I’m doing a good job with all that brushing and flossing and that. Let’s see what I get. Each time the dentist would say, “Oh. No cavities.” Yes! I’m doing awesome. I’m great at this. “But you know you should floss a little more.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, but when I floss it causes my gums to bleed.”

And the dentist was like, “Yeah. That’s the point. You really need to do that more.”

In fact, I saw a dentist in the DC area when I lived there and when we first moved out here I was going to an appointment shortly before we were moving and the dentist said, “You know you’ve got one there I really think we’re going to need to fill.”

And I was like, “Yeah. I’ll just take care of that when I get to the next place.”

So, when I moved, I went to the dentist and I didn’t say a word, just to see if they found it too. When they looked in my mouth they said, “Oh, all clear. No cavities.”

“Ah. Ha. Ha. See I was right.”

But another one came up and I had to get it taken care of. It’s funny how like really all I need is for that dentist to tell me, no cavities and suddenly I’m great at this dental hygiene thing. I’m just doing a great job. It’s a nice little measure I could use to see how good of a job I was doing. We like that, don’t we? We like good measures. We like things that will tell us, how good are you doing.

And in the early church this was a struggle of conveying this idea of grace, a completely new concept to people that Paul and others were bringing this to. And as Paul is advising Timothy and in all the letters that Paul writes, a lot of his writings are trying to help people to understand, what does this grace mean? What does this forgiveness really mean? What does it mean into the daily life that I live and in this faith? Am I good enough?

Now there is a version of where Paul could have written this letter to Timothy as a leader in the church and say, “Let me tell you, I was a mess. I was terrible. You know, I had a reputation. I was a blasphemer. I was a persecutor of people of the faith, a man of violence. But no longer. Now I am this great leader before you, Timothy. You just need to follow my lead”, but that’s not what he does.

In this letter what he says is like, you know I had this reputation and I did these things and I was given forgiveness because I am the foremost of sinners. He didn’t say I was. He said I am. Paul didn’t see that his state of sinfulness has changed even though he has made this big turn in his life. Even though he had this big shazam moment with God and turned his life around and became one to actually spread the good news, he does not see himself as out of the thicket, so to speak. In fact he goes on to say that it’s precisely because I am all of that, that me being a messenger of

God, me being a leader of the church, well that just makes God look all the better because, in the new Rob version of the Bible, it's basically Paul saying, "Look if he can make something out of me, I'm a mess."

That's a fantastic witness to the power of the gospel. It's a fantastic witness to grace. He's not going down the pathway of figuring out if he's good enough, he's already admitting that he's not. I wonder how good you are.

You know, we put old Pastor Rob's childhood on the chopping block and let the young ones cast their judgment upon what I must have been like. Let's don't go into the past. I don't want to know about your childhood. I want to know right now. On a scale of 1 to 10 where one is a sinner. I mean a sinner! And 10 is a saint. Where 1 is a sinner! And 10 is a saint. Where would you put yourself? What's the number? How you doing?

Oh wow. You're holding up numbers. Oh, whoa. There's confession there. Okay! That's all right, though. That's all right. I saw a 6 flashed in front of me. That's pretty good, right? Ooh, 6 is a nice number, you know? Cause 6 is like, I'm humble, but I'm not in the lower half. Right? That's a good one.

Some of you are sittin' there and you know what you did this week. You know what you did and you're going, 2. You know. Some of you are smiling too big right now. Some of you though, you're like, I'm about a 9. I am killin' it. Right?

This is a sort of game that maybe you don't specifically play this, but this is too often something that creeps into our idea of grace. Because this question I've given to you...Pastor Alex will tell you, it was a horrible theological question to ask you. It was terrible theology. Bad pastoring. It was a lot of fun, but bad pastor, cause that's not what grace is, but that's what we want to make it. We cheapen grace.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote all about this during the 30's and then throughout the rise of the Nazi regime about what had happened to our concept of grace and it's continued to erode in that way and it's crept into our understanding of what grace is, that we cheapen it.

We cheapen grace and there are different ways that we do it. For some of us we cheapen grace as saying, "well, look, there is no way I can follow all that stuff in the Bible. That's just ridiculous". Maybe you think of yourself as a sinner beyond redeeming. I'm never going to be able to really live into that, and so you just cheapen it and abandon it.

Then for others we go, Well, let me see here. Um, let me see here. Um, you know, whatever you say like I'm like a five, I'm a six, I'm a seven. Whatever number you picked, but what I imagine is, whatever number you picked, if my next question was, where's God's cutoff? Where's the cutoff? I imagine you'd put the cutoff just below your number. Or maybe, in an act of pious humility, it's just above. Like I'm a 6, but God wants a 7, so I'm just like one of these days I'll get my act together and I'll get it right over. Hopefully before that end time comes for me I just gotta get right over that line. It's gotta be close though. Right?

But if grace is that, then grace isn't anything beautiful and wonderful done by Christ. It's like grace just becomes the starting pistol in the race of your life. It's nothing that saves you. It's just something that tosses the opportunity out there and you gotta get above a certain meter rating in the way you live your life.

If grace was a line for you to get above, that cheapens it to such a small thing. But sometimes with grace though, it's not a matter of like where you said, "Oh it's this line and I get above it. Others will just completely eliminate the value of it by saying, "well, I believe in God so good enough." That grace is just like this, whoosh. Everything's done. You can forget about it now and go on with your life. Christ died for your sins. Just go on. Live your life. Nothing to do here. Nothing to see here.

And in a way that's exactly what happened in those 30's and 40's in Nazi Germany that Dietrich Bonhoefer was dealing with. His response of telling the church at the time that you've just become too comfortable in telling people that grace is just simply something that you have it, so your responsibility is to be stewards of the community and the situation you're in. Well, it just kinda goes away. They didn't like that kind of attitude. He ended up in a concentration camp and then was hung for his faithfulness.

But the idea at that time was that the church was simply just preaching this idea of like, grace is something that you receive and then once you have it, that's it. And when you see things going on around you, there's no responsibility to act upon that. In fact, maybe it's okay, because you know, Jesus covered everything, so we don't really need to stress out about any of that. Just don't worry about it. Let it go.

But grace is not meant to be that. What Paul is saying in his letter to Timothy is that it's not a matter of, I was this and then I got better, or that I got over a certain barrier or something, or it just washed everything away. What Paul says in this letter is like, no I am fully a sinner, but I have been appointed to. I have been ushered into a

different role than that and that is that of saint. That each and every one of you is a sinner and a saint.

It's not a matter of like, am I 30% this, 70% that? It's Jesus math. And in Jesus math, Jesus is 100% God, 100% human. You are a 100% sinner and 100% saint. And what grace is, is that battlefield between those 2 things about you, your nature and your identity. Grace is your willingness to go into that. Grace is this claim upon you such that you don't want to live as a sinner. So that you don't want to live as one who advocates for cruelty and hatred in this world and divisiveness.

It makes you look at your life. What grace does, grace is a work of the spirit that makes you look at yourself and say, I know that I am this and that I am a sinner. I know that I have brokenness. I know too often that I go to a temporary pleasure to just get through the day. That I just try to get by and get through things. That I don't need to worry about those who are suffering. I've done enough. I don't need to worry about what I still have to work in my own spirit because it's good enough. I got over a mark.

Grace says, "No! You are a new person. You have a fundamental different identity. So yes, you still have that nature and you're never going to get rid of it. You are not going to reach perfection. You're not going to reach a point where you get over some mark. You want to know if you are worthy of heaven? The answer is no. You want to know if you are good enough for heaven with the actions and the things you've done? No! You're not! That's why grace is so costly. It cost God his only son and it's invited to be costly for you as well. That it should change your life.

It should cause you to look and examine who you are and how you live and how you think, and does forgiveness flow from you? Does grace flow from you? Where are the places where you're letting hatred and hurt go unchallenged? Where's the places in your heart where you just justify your actions because, you know, it's okay for you? Grace says, don't be satisfied with that and wrestle with that. But at the same time, you are good. You are a blessing. You don't have to be torn down to want to be better.

This is where it's a blessing to be married to a psychologist because I learned about fancy words like dialectical behavior therapy. Did I get that right? Good! Dialectical behavior therapy. This is this thing that's come out of psychology which there's two things that you need to hold on to when you do this. The first of which is that you need to accept who you are. And then secondly, you also need to accept that there are things you can do to be better, to get better.

Sometimes we think in order to be better, I have to think of where I am now as bad, as not right, unacceptable, but in this way psychology has finally caught up with theology in understanding this fundamental nature of who we are as people of God and that's that you are accepted and loved and cherished just as you are. And yet because of your identity as both saint and sinner, there is an opportunity for you to experience real joy.

Now being told that your life as a follower of Jesus Christ is going to be all that work and rooting out all that brokenness within you, some of you gotta be thinking like, "Ah. I'm tired. I don't have room mentally, physically, emotionally to be working on myself, it's a work that brings about the ultimate joy." Because what's going to happen instead is that if we don't work on these things, if we don't seek to work on that brokenness within us, in those spaces where we fall short of our faith and our calling, we'll just fill our lives with other things. We'll begin to believe that these other pursuits in our life will bring happiness. That achievement in some other area of life, or accumulation of some other objects, or some kind of self-delusional justification of all of our actions or just through some simple quick pleasures which may be bad for us in the long run.

We'll reach out to all these other things trying to grasp at joy then we'll wonder why we're not happy. But our identity as both sinner and saint invites us into what is our actual source of joy in this life. And that is letting grace work in us and working on those things, serving others, loving others, forgiving others in radical, beautiful ways that go beyond what we could do out of our own nature. These are the sources of true joy. There is nothing that you are going to drink, or take, or smoke, or do, or achieve that's going to bring a lasting joy in your life, the way living into grace can be.

So, if you are looking to come to church to find out if you're good enough, you made it over the bar, no, you didn't. And yet you are good and beloved. And there's work to do, but that work is where we can find the joy that we spend most of our lives chasing, day after day.

May God be glorified by the work that you do to discover that grace at work in you.

Halleluiah and Amen.