

Truly Sound Ministry

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bibles and to our reading this morning, which is in Paul's first letter to Timothy. 1 Timothy, and we're reading the whole of chapter 1. It's page 991, if you have one of the visitor's Bibles.

And we began a couple of weeks ago a study in 1 Timothy in particular, although straying a little bit into the other letters of 2 Timothy and Titus. And last week we had a good look at 1 Timothy as a whole and some of its key teachings and key concerns.

If you didn't get one of the outlines of the book, there'll be some of those on the trolleys outside the rooms, and you can pick one up afterwards if you'd like. But this morning we're going to delve into chapter 1, and I'm going to read the whole of the chapter.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope. To Timothy, my true child in the faith, grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith.

[1 : 29] The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law without understanding either what they're saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

Now we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

I thank him who has given me strength, power, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, although formerly I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent opponent.

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 trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

[3 : 10] But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Christ Jesus might display his perfect patience as an example, a pattern, to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

To the King of kings, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience.

By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of the faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, Paul is speaking there so very personally about the wonder of the transforming gospel of Christ. Well, if you turn with me to 1 Timothy chapter 1.

Now that we've spent some time getting to know 1 Timothy as a whole, it's time for us to start getting into the meat of the letter. And it's a letter that's preserved in our Bibles because Christian churches are always at risk.

[4 : 40] Even the keenest evangelical church is only ever one generation at most away from decline and disappearance. At least as far as being a useful missionary church is concerned.

That's true. Many of us will have seen it again and again. A church can survive for a time running down the spiritual capital, as it were, of a previous godly ministry, but it can't do that forever. And a dozing leads to decline, to disease, and ultimately to death. And that is what had begun in these Ephesian churches that Paul is writing to.

A strategic center, where the city was, for the whole of the province of Asia Minor. But already, its house churches were seriously at risk.

Christian people were being corrupted by Christian pastors, whose message and ministry had been corrupted in exactly the way that Paul himself had warned them would happen.

[5 : 42] Remember back in Acts chapter 20 when he warned those leaders. After I go, he says, from your own number men will arise, speaking twisted things to draw disciples after them.

Well, that had come exactly to pass. Look at verse 6 here. Certain persons, he says, these are leaders, they have swerved away from the true faith, wandering away from the gospel into vain discussion, meaningless talk, which, if not halted, would lead the whole church to wander off into oblivion.

So having discovered that when Paul passed through Ephesus with Timothy, he left Timothy there, one of his most trusted colleagues, to deal with the problem, to rescue the church from harm and to restore it to true spiritual health.

To turn it back from what verse 3 calls different doctrine, these twisted teachers, and to what verse 10 calls sound doctrine, healthy doctrine, hygienic doctrines, where we get that word hygiene from, which is in accordance with the glorious gospel of God.

Literally, it says the gospel of the glory of the blessed God in stark contrast to the gospel of gangrene, and that's actually the word he uses in 2 Timothy 2 to describe this, the gospel of gangrene of men like Hymenaeus, as mentioned here in verse 20, which he knew would be fatal, ultimately, to the church in Ephesus, or indeed to the church anywhere.

[7 : 18] And so he wrote this letter, it's a public letter, do you remember, to all the church, to underline and to affirm that Timothy is the teacher of the authentic apostolic faith.

And of course, not only that, to give him full apostolic authority for these churches to deal with the problem. And so Timothy, he says, was both to declare, but also to demonstrate a real ministry of health, of soundness, in contrast to the disease, to the disorder of some of these currently popular Christian leaders.

Those who talked a lot about being very sound and having lots of knowledge of the Bible, but in fact, Paul says, we're unsound, we're ignorant. Remember in chapter 6, verse 20, their knowledge, he said, is just false knowledge.

And so Timothy was to bring this church back to being a truly healthy church by restoring a truly healthy ministry, a truly sound ministry. By showing that real sound doctrine is always in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed book God, which is what Paul had been entrusted with, he says.

And which now, verse 18, he is entrusting so clearly to Timothy and to others like him, who would not swerve into tireless myths and speculation, but rather share God's transforming mercy with sinners.

[8 : 48] In other words, a truly sound church will be a church that is truly saving sinners. Anything else, whatever the talk, anything else is not sound, not at all healthy.

So what then are the marks of sound and healthy ministry that Timothy's to demonstrate? Well, Paul tells us that a true ministry both knows and shows real protection for the Christian church, the real purpose of the Christian scriptures, and the real power of the Christian message.

First of all, in topping and tailing the chapter in verses 3 to 7 and verses 18 to 20, Paul says, a truly healthy ministry knows and shows real protection for the Christian church.

It will recognize and it will root out any emphasis, any imbalance, which harms the members of the church and which halts the mission of the church.

Now in Ephesus, the church needed protection from what verse 3 calls this different doctrine.

Something that contrasted with what verse 10 calls this sound, this healthy doctrine of the apostolic gospel.

[10:08] What was going on was a ministry of harm instead of a ministry of health. Now they may have used that sort of language of sound doctrine and sound knowledge.

They may have been saying, well, we can teach you what's really sound. And it probably focused a great deal about knowledge. Knowledge of the Bible, no doubt. Knowledge of the history of the faith.

But in fact, in chapter 6, Paul just calls it irreverent babble. Contradictions, false knowledge. Fake news, I suppose, we might call it today. Which in fact, was doing the very opposite of what it should be doing.

Causing people to swerve from the true faith. This different doctrine, of course, it talked a lot about the Bible. But it was actually utterly misusing the Bible.

Look at verse 4. Paul says it was taken up with myths and genealogies. Things that just brought speculation instead of building sincere faith. These are the sort of people who could quote Bible verses endlessly at you, but actually really had no idea what the Bible's message is about.

[11:16] I'm sure you've come across those kind of people sometimes in a Bible study group and wish you could escape from them as they quote you verbatim, endlessly and endlessly, but no idea of what they're talking about. But here, these kind of people had become very influential leaders.

And so it was deadly serious. And in the church, therefore, the Bible had become just a reservoir for the church's speculation instead of for the world's salvation.

and their ministry had therefore totally lost the big picture, the whole story of the scriptures which are centered, as Paul says, in verse 1, the very first verse of the letter, on God our Savior and Christ Jesus our hope, on the cross of Christ and on the coming of Christ.

And instead, they'd wandered off into complete side issues. And of course, that has happened, hasn't it, so often through the history of the church. starting to major on minors and utterly missing the main thing that the gospel is all about seeking and saving sinners in the world, transforming them into, well, look at verse 5, into people of love, the love of God and the love of neighbor that comes from hearts that are purified from a sincere faith in Jesus Christ.

But that kind of ministry leads the church to wander off into vain theological speculations and lose completely its sense of real salvation, losing the glory of the blessed God who came into the world to save sinners.

[12:54] Some of you will know, I'm sure, what people like that are like in churches. It's the sort of person with a complete bee in their bonnet that whatever you're studying in a group Bible study or whatever conversation they're having with you after the church service, they are immediately onto their hobby horse.

trying to convert you to their view about what we should think about the millennium or what their view of particular holiness might be or what Christian music ought to be like or particularly their view of baptism or their view of prophecy or their view of what you should sing or shouldn't sing or why you should only sing psalms or a hundred other things, hobby horses.

The sort of person that will encounter a brand new Christian and the first thing they want to do is convert them to their particular view of one of these things.

I'll never forget my father telling me years ago about his own brother who was converted very wonderfully on a troop ship in the Far East while he was serving during the Second World War and after the war he came back to his hometown of Aberdeen and I think it was perhaps his very first Sunday he was going off to church in the morning and carrying his Bible with him on the bus and somebody else on the bus spotted him with his Bible and said to him oh you're going to church. Yes he said I've just become a Christian and I'm going this is my first opportunity to go and worship God with other Christians since I've come back from the war. What was the first thing that man said to him? Ah, but that church that you're going to doesn't practice baptism the proper way.

[14:21] Why don't you come to my church and we can really show you how to do it properly? No interest in the fact that he had gone from death to life that he'd found Christ and eternal life. No joy that here was a man going off with his Bible in his hand to meet with fellow Christians for the very first time.

All he wanted was vain discussion about secondary, trivial matters. The very opposite of real Christian love and faith.

That's what was going on in these churches in Ephesus. Now we don't know what the exact teachings were. Verse 4 suggests it probably had something to do at least with Jewish myths and

the sort of Jewish writings and traditions, things outside the Bible.

That makes sense, doesn't it? Because we all know that there are many Christians who love to get taken up with the writings of some particular theologian, some particular leader, and they'll go on and on about what they say about something much more often than what Jesus says about something.

Always be wary of people like that, by the way. Everything they say, oh, so-and-so says. Be careful. We don't know what the exact details are here, but we don't need to because we do know what their ministry led to.

[15 : 39] And according to the Lord Jesus himself, that's the telling thing, isn't it? What does he say in Matthew chapter 7? Yes, there will be many false teachers who come in among the people. They look like harmless sheep and sound like harmless sheep, but in fact, what are they?

Ravenous wolves. Just the same language Paul uses. But you will know them, says Jesus, by their smooth talk, their knowledge. No.

By their fruit, you will know them. We need to look, don't we, at the fruit of what any particular emphasis or any movement within the church produces in the lives of people and in the life of the church.

A ministry of the true gospel, Paul says, accords with and will lead to real godliness. It's the truth that leads to godliness, says Titus 1, verse 1.

Well, does what these people are telling you lead to the godliness that verse 5 here describes?

Does it lead to love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith in Christ our Lord?

[16 : 45] Does this ministry lead to the godliness of the members or is it leading instead just to the gain for the ministers? Does it magnify the mercy of God to the world or does it just elevate the so-called man of God in the church?

Does it promote above everything else the salvation of God or is it promoting the servants of God or those who claim to be? The aim of our charge, says Paul in verse 5, that is of a true Christian minister and the true apostolic succession.

The aim of our charge is to produce real love to God and fellow man through the transformation of hearts of outsiders through sincere faith, he says.

Sincere faith in the gospel of Christ that converts people and keeps believers growing in that love to God and man. that is the fruit of true and healthy gospel ministry.

Thorough going conversion to Christ and a thorough going and growing commitment to Christ. that is what you see in a really sound and healthy ministry.

[17 : 58] But contrast, the fruit of the different doctrine, verse 6, it results in people swerving from these. That is from the mark and the message of true faith in Christ into what?

Into vain discussion, into meaningless talk. The meaningless myths of man crowd out the marvelous mercies of God in all the teaching, in all the conversation of that church.

And that is no trivial matter. It's not just that it's contrary to the sound and healthy doctrine that verse 10 speaks of. It is utterly deadly for the church. Look at the language that's used, verse 6.

Swerving, swerving away from the truth altogether. It's the image of a car, isn't it, on the motorway, swerving away off into the oncoming traffic to disaster. In chapter 4, verse 1, Paul talks about people departing from the faith and devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and to demons.

In chapter 5, verse 15, he says they're swerving off under the sway of Satan himself. It's that serious. And look at the imagery he uses here in verse 19.

[19 : 09] The imagery of a shipwreck. Not just shipwreck of their faith, it should read shipwreck of the faith. It's affecting many others, it's affecting the whole church. Once a ship is on the rocks, it's helpless, isn't it?

It's being battered by the wind and the waves. It's finished. It's going to sink. And everyone on her will perish. Just think of that awful sinking just last week in the lake in Tanzania.

Nearly every soul on board was lost. But that is the fruit in a church that may indeed major on what it thinks is knowledge, even biblical knowledge, but quite literally instead has lost the plot of the Bible.

Lost the real plot of the Bible which was given to the church not for wild speculations about God but for the salvation of God. Look at verse 4. For the stewardship, for the saving plan that is from God by faith in Jesus Christ.

That alone is what can purify the heart and the conscience for love. That alone is what can bring the true love of God to birth in the human heart through the grace that is in Jesus Christ for all who will believe.

[20 : 27] And a church that begins to lose that, the gospel of the glory of God who loves to save sinners, who desires that none should perish but that all should come to a knowledge of the truth.

A church that loses the plot there will head for the rocks and for disaster. And so a church has to be protected by an authoritative challenge to all that kind of thing.

And so verse 3, Timothy is to tell them to stop and he's to make them stop which verses 18 to 20 make so plain. he is to force out and he is to keep out those dangerous people.

You've often heard me say that there's a necessary negative at the very heart of the Christian gospel. Titus 2 verse 12, it's the grace of God that teaches us to say no to worldliness and to ungodliness.

And that means friends that there must be a necessary negative at the heart of real and healthy Christian ministry. We have to be able to say no to any influence that will steer the precious church of Christ onto the rocks and to shipwreck.

[21 : 41] And that can mean as verse 18 says relentless warfare. But you see it's good warfare says Paul. It's done out of faith and of good conscience.

The very things that verse 5 tell us lead to love. What Paul is saying it's a loving thing to wage this warfare for gospel truth. So don't let your faith be rocked by that fight.

That's what he's saying in verse 19. Hold on to faith and a good conscience in this because it's easy to get very discouraged if you have relentless battles for the truth like that.

It's easy to want to throw in the towel to want to give up. But no says Paul look what he says that's your calling Timothy. That's what was recognized in you by the church when they laid the hands upon you for your commissioning.

Don't give up. It's hard to have to do that fight. Sometimes you will have to put people out of the church in order to protect the flock of God.

[22 : 43] Paul had done that with these two, Hymenaeus and Alexander. He handed them over to Satan he said. Cast them outside the church back into the world, the realm of Satan. Both to protect the church but also, notice what he says, also in the hope that they would recognize their error and repent.

from their blasphemy. And sometimes the truth is that people will not recognize how damaging their conduct and their teaching is to others, to Christians, and also to themselves, unless they're forced to face drastic measures like that and being put out of the church.

We've had to do that sometimes. It's very painful. But it's essential, says Paul, because a truly healthy ministry both knows and shows real protection for the Christian church.

Well, that's the negative aspect of the protection that's needed. But there's also, of course, a hugely positive side to the realm. It's not just that you cut out what is wrong. You need to restore and fan into flames what is right, which is the real purpose of the message of God our Savior and Christ our hope to all people, which is the real message of the real ministry of all the scriptures.

That's what the whole of the middle of this chapter is telling us. Focus from verses 7 to 11, where Paul is telling us that a true and healthy ministry both knows and shows the real purpose of all the scriptures.

[24 : 16] Churches and Christian leaders and Christian people who are truly sound in doctrine, will be those who are devoted to taking the glorious gospel into the world to lost sinners so that they find salvation.

Look at verse 8. The real question you see is, what is the Bible? What is all the revelation of God about God's righteousness and our sinfulness? What is it all for?

And the answer is in verse 9. It's not for the just, for the righteous. or for those who think they're righteous. It's for sinners.

What did Jesus himself say? Those who are righteous, those who are well, have no need of a physician. But those who are sick, I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

And God's revelation to man in all the scriptures and of course in the ultimate revelation in the person of our Lord Jesus, to whom all the scriptures testify. God's revelation from beginning to end is his revelation of salvation.

[25 : 27] His word is a saving word. And it's for a world that is lost in darkness. That's what's described in verses 9 and 10 vividly. The gospel is for the disobedient, for the ungodly, for sinners, for the violent, for all the sexually immoral, including homosexuals, for liars, for people traffickers, for whoever, he says, whoever is living contrary to the healthy way of true humanity, which is in accordance with the glory of God, as verse 11 says.

You see, it's for people in a world like that in order to bring them out of that world and into salvation. salvation. And every single human being needs that salvation.

Because as God's law shows us, there's no distinction. That's what Paul says, isn't it, in Romans chapter 3. All sinned, all lack the glory of God. And all must be saved, must be justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

And a true ministry of teaching the scriptures will be, as verse 4 says, a stewardship of salvation. Bringing people into the love of God through hearts that are changed by sincere faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Not swerving off into speculation. Speculation that turns the Bible away from its primary purpose of proclaiming salvation to the world. turns it instead into something that just promotes speculation inside the church.

[27 : 12] That leaves the church no longer open outwardly to the world. But increasingly just closed in on itself. But that's not how God's good and beautiful revelation, as he calls it in verse 8 of the law, that's not what it's for.

The Bible is a beautiful thing, a good thing, if it's used properly. But Paul's saying it can become a bad thing, it can become a blasphemous thing in the hands of people who just abuse it.

And that is what was at issue here. What do the commentators get completely off track here, bogged down in all kinds of things about Paul? Is Paul having a controversy here between the law and the gospel, between legalism and so on?

No, no, no. Just substitute the word Bible or scriptures for the word law there in verse 7 and verse 8. That's what Paul's talking about. The issue is that these leaders were claiming, verse 7, to be teachers of the law, that is rabbis, teachers of the scriptures.

Tyner in his commentary says they claim authority for their teaching as authoritative interpreters of the scriptures. And they were very confident, very dogmatic, Paul tells this in their own particular interpretation.

[28 : 32] But Tyner goes on and says this, Error, the claim to authority, and dogmatic insecurity make a deadly combination. These characteristics make a timeless portrait of a false teacher.

Doctrinal subtleties, special interpretation, spurious claims to authority, controversy, and dogmatism ought to make God's people suspicious. Those are very perceptive comments.

We should heed those. Paul was certainly immediately suspicious when he came across the atmosphere in Ephesus. And he saw immediately that their teaching of the scriptures was not chiming with God's true purpose for all the scriptures.

The way they used the Bible, as another scholar says, served to show that they had missed the point of both the Old Testament itself and of the gospel. What is the point of all the scriptures? What does Paul say in those famous words we all know from 2 Timothy 3, verse 15 and 16? All scripture is God breathed, he says. And what are they all for? For making you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

[29 : 48] And that you may be equipped for every good work for Christ Jesus and his gospel. The scriptures are for leading outsiders to salvation in Christ and leading all believers on in service to Christ.

There's nothing more beautiful, nothing more good and wonderful than that. Rescuing people in darkness. People who are living contrary to everything that is healthy and good for their humanity. And rescuing them into a life that is in accordance, says Paul, with the glory of the blessed God our Savior. Calling those who have fallen short of the glory of God to share fully in the glory of God. That's what the scriptures are for. And that's what the ministry of the Bible is for. That's what the risen Lord Jesus told his disciples, wasn't it, after his resurrection in Luke 24, when he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures.

scriptures. It's all been fulfilled, said Jesus, through my saving work. And the point is, now repentance and forgiveness of sins can be preached in my name to all nations.

[31 : 02] That's what Paul wrote to the Roman Christians in his great missionary letter, the Romans. For Christ is the end. Christ is the goal of the whole law. The whole of the Old Testament scriptures.

So there is righteousness for everyone who believes. That's what Moses proclaimed, Paul says. That's what we proclaim.

There's no distinction. All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Salvation is what it's all about. And that's what a true ministry will always be focused on.

Prayer and proclamation for the world. Proclamation of the God who desires that all men should come to a knowledge of the truth and find salvation. A ministry that toils and strives to show the world our hope through the Savior in whom we believe.

It reaches out to the lawless, to the outsider, to those who hate God, to bring them inside, to turn them into lovers of God through the grace that is in Christ, which overflows to transform even a hardened, unlikely, blasphemous enemy of the Christian church like Paul himself.

[32 : 21] But here in Ephesus, Paul is saying that whole ministry and mission has gone into reverse. And the influence of these Christian leaders was turning people who were already Christian believers into blasphemers like Hymenaeus and Alexander.

Theirs was an anti-gospel use of the Bible. And it was causing both shipwreck in the church and it was shutting out the world.

They were doing what Jesus had accused the Pharisees in his own day of doing, shutting up the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. And the Jewish leaders did that. Why? Because they misunderstood their own scriptures.

The purpose of them was veiled to them, Paul says to Corinthians. Because only in Christ is the veil removed. Only in the Savior do we see the meaning of the whole thing.

That He, our Savior, is the key message that the whole Bible is about. And friends, the tragedy is that that has been true also often in the history of the Christian church.

[33 : 33] from the first century right through to our own. So often that veil seems to come down again on the church. And so often Christians seem to have lost the overwhelming purpose of the scriptures that we've been entrusted with and the message of God's salvation to the world.

And in the church the focus turns from the message of salvation to just meaningless speculation. salvation. The Bible gets lost as a sort of piecemeal text to fuel controversy.

And the primary thing, the saving purpose of God, it drifts to the periphery out of sight altogether. And so people think that sound doctrine becomes all about endless discussions, about traditions, about the great myths of our church history, our particular flavor or whatever it is.

And that kind of church, well, it'll bear fruit of plenty of conceit, plenty of controversy, plenty of constant friction like Paul talks about in chapter 6.

But precious few converts from darkness to light, from blasphemy to believing faith, from hating to loving the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is always a danger.

[34 : 59] That's why this book is in the Bible. It's a danger, especially for churches that do take doctrine seriously as we do. For churches that do teach the Bible seriously as we must do.

But we must never forget that a truly sound church and ministry knows and shows the real purpose of all the scriptures. scriptures that reveal the Son of Man who came to seek and to save that which was lost.

And thirdly, let's never forget that a truly healthy ministry knows and shows the real power of that Christian message in its midst, which can and which does transform even the world's greatest sinners from blasphemy to belief, from persecution of the church to proclaiming Christ, and from being haters of God to being heralds of the mercy of God in this world.

Where a healthy ministry is in evidence, that transforming power will be in evidence. Because really sound churches are in the world to save sinners.

And Paul, he tells us here that he is surely the greatest example of that real gospel ministry of mercy. If he can be saved to serve Christ, then God can rescue and transform any sinner, any blasphemer.

[36 : 23] Look, verse 13. He was a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent opponent. But look, verse 12. Sovereign, saving power transformed him.

He gave me strength. Literally, he empowered me to be faithful and to serve as an apostle. He's underlining, isn't he, in verse 12, his apostolic authority.

But surely his chief point is to remind everyone of the power of that true gospel. That a ministry that is born out of sheer sovereign grace and mercy must lead to a ministry that is based wholly on sovereign grace and mercy.

What is the truly sound take on the Bible's key message? knowledge? What is the real deep, earnest knowledge for the severe, for the real Christian who wants to know the real heart of what it's all about?

Well, it's in verse 15. Look. This is what we all need to accept. This is the really trustworthy thing. This is what matters more than anything else. This is the great center of it all.

[37 : 36] Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners. Of which I am foremost, he adds. Humbly recognizing that his own calling, his own apostleship has absolutely nothing to do with any credentials, any superiority on his part.

Only to do with the sheer mercy of God in Christ. I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent enemy. But, verse 13, I received mercy.

Mercy. I needed mercy because I was ignorant. I wasn't acting in belief as I thought I was. I was acting in utter unbelief, culpable, damnable rebellion. Don't think Paul is saying for a moment here, somehow because he was ignorant, he deserved God's mercy.

He's saying the opposite. He's saying I was culpably ignorant. My only hope was sheer mercy. But he did receive mercy.

And for this reason, look at verse 16, that in me, as of the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example, as a prototype of all those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

[38 : 52] Paul's transformation serves as a pattern for everyone. It shows the real power of the true Christian message. That salvation is a completely sovereign work of God.

A sovereign call out of sin to serve the Lord Jesus. And what God did for Paul, he is saying he can do and he will do and he does do for all who will believe in him for salvation.

Because his grace overflows. That's the language Paul uses in verse 14. Do you see? Like a flood. Where sin abounds, God's grace can abound all the more.

A totally sovereign work work for a totally sinful wretch. And it's not just what Paul once was that makes him rejoice in God's mercy. In verse 15 he says, I am still the foremost of sinners.

It's not false humility, it's just that here is a man who knew so deeply the gospel of grace and the glory of God. God. And as his life went on and he knew more and more truly the depth of the mess of his own heart, he loved more and more the depth of the mercy in God's heart.

[40 : 09] That's often the way, isn't it? The longer you've been a Christian, the more you know your own heart, don't you? And the more you come to love the mercy of God which you need and which you know overflows.

That spring of living water welling up to eternal life as Jesus says. I think that was Paul years before when he wrote to the Corinthians, he called himself the least of the apostles.

But by God's grace I am what I am, he said. Some years later to the Ephesians he said, I'm the least of all the saints. But to me this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches.

And now here he is years later at the end of his life and he says, I am the foremost sinner, the chief of sinners. But I received mercy because Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners like me and like you.

So people whose lives are an absolute mess can be flooded with abundant mercy. Mercy that covers the sins of even the greatest sinner, buries them forever under that overflowing grace.

[41 : 26] Mercy that can call the church's chief persecutor, become the chief proclaimer of his mercy to the whole world. And Paul is saying, if God did that for me, his power can do it and will do it for you.

The grace that overflows in the faith and love to Jesus Christ, it will overflow to everyone who believes in him for eternal life.

And you need to know that friends this morning if you're an enemy, a persecutor of God. If you have an unbelieving heart or have done until now, there is mercy for you.

However great your mess, it can't be too great for God's mercy. mercy. And you need to know it too if you've been a Christian for many, many years, many decades like Paul. Because if you're an honest person, you will know now more than you knew when you first believed the depth of the

mess in your own heart.

And your need for that mercy. I'm so glad and thankful that all my conscious life I've known that gospel. But I still need it every hour.

[42 : 34] I still need the gospel that was etched into my mind just as a young child singing those songs wide, wide as the ocean, high as the heavens above, and deep as the deepest sea is my Savior's love.

And that I, though so unworthy, still am a child of his care because his word teaches me that his love can reach me, even me, anywhere and everywhere.

that his grace overflows for me, even as it did for Paul through faith and love in Jesus Christ.

Friends, that is God's message for every one of us today.

There's mercy for you. However great your mess, much greater still is God's mercy in Christ for all who believe in him for eternal life.

That's our message for the world. Paul is saying that's the message of all the scriptures. And only a church that magnifies that message to the world and in the world and for the world, only that church can ever be called a sound church, a healthy church.

[43 : 48] Because sound churches, Paul says, are in the business of saving sinners into the service of Christ, through the mercy of Christ, and for the great glory of God.

Look at verse 17. Do you see? It's that saving ministry that brings honor and glory to the only God, the King of kings forever and ever. Not inward focused quarrels and controversies and vain discussion and speculation about all sorts of debatable theological matters.

Not that. That kind of ministry leads the church only to shipwreck. That kind of ministry leaves the world going to hell. But a truly healthy church, a sound ministry, it knows and it shows the real power of the Christian message, of the Christ who came into this world to save sinners.

And so it proclaims him in all the scriptures to all the world. And it joins in the praise and the joy even of the angels in heaven when even one sinner repents and comes to know that life in Christ.

So friends, let us help one another to always be that truly sound church. So that our story and our song all the day long is this word in verse 15.

[45 : 14] This is trustworthy. And this is deserving of full acceptance by everybody. That Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners.

Amen. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, Heavenly Father, we confess, Lord, that many times perhaps in our own life, and yes, even in our church's life, we've been in danger and perhaps even have wondered from the great truth that is at the heart of every page of these scriptures before us.

That you are the God who loves and the God who saves. And who came to seek and to save that which was lost. So help us, Lord, we pray in our own hearts, in our voices, in our life, in all that we think and do to magnify the mercy of God our Savior.

And so to hold out to the world the message of Christ our hope until he comes. Keep us, we pray, healthy. Keep us sound.

Keep us proclaiming Jesus. For we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.