

"Chief of Sinners"

Text: 1 Timothy 1:12-17

May the love of God the Father fill you with wonder. May the sacrifice of God the Son fill you with gratitude. And may the occupation of your heart by God the Holy Spirit fill you with comfort, confidence, and joy. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians, the theme of the Women's Retreat this year centered on Paul's encouragement to "Excel." I doubt there is an area in our lives where we cannot improve, where we could not possibly do better or make progress. Complacency is never an option for Christians, which is why Paul also talked often about "growing," "striving," "struggling," and "pressing on or forward." Sometimes this growth comes naturally when Christians just ask themselves the right questions.

So also this morning we begin with a question: *Why is it that we tend to secretly delight in both hearing and sharing bad things about other people?* Obviously the question alludes to the sin of gossip, but by this particular question our goal is to search out the *root cause* of gossip. In other words, though we can easily define gossip as "anything spoken about our neighbor from an unloving heart," what we're trying to search out this morning is the root evil in the human heart that makes it unloving in the first place.

Since at the root of every sin you will find the basic evils of pride and greed, we would expect to find them also here. And we do. It is sinful pride that causes us to want to push down others so that we feel superior. It is greed that causes us to covet the respect and admiration lavished upon others. We love hearing bad things about others because it makes us feel better about ourselves. Reading about (and then sharing) heinous acts committed by despicable people naturally makes us feel superior. I feel better about myself because, so our sinful flesh reasons, at least I'm not *that* bad. There is an evil in us that loves to see the bar lowered by others so that we can feel ever more self-righteous.

It is this basic human truth that we examine this morning by way of yet another question we ask of ourselves: "Who is the chief of sinners?" The text that will guide and instruct us is found in Paul's First Letter to Timothy, the 1st Chapter, beginning with Verse 12:

ESV(1 Timothy 1:12-17) I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and

insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 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 the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

This is God's Word. Acknowledging the divine origin of these words and asking our God to bless us through their study, so we pray, "**Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth. Amen.**"

So just who is the worst human being that you've ever either met, or about whom you've ever heard or read? Who is the worst sinner, the most despicable human being? Ask society in general and you'll probably hear nominations like Hitler, Stalin, or Ted Bundy. Ask people who are intensely political, and they'll probably list whoever is running against their candidate. Yet, based on our text, the Apostle Paul would nominate himself. You heard it for yourselves in our text: "**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.**" Is that then our "final answer," or should we "poll the audience" to make sure? Because it's *highly unlikely* that "the audience" would list the great Apostle Paul as the worst of the worst.

How do we explain this – that arguably the greatest of the apostles considered himself the chief of sinners? Was he just being modest? Was Paul just using hyperbole or flamboyant speech to teach us something? Not at all. God's Word doesn't lie to instruct. It doesn't promote what is untrue to teach us what is true. What we have in our text is therefore Paul's honest opinion about himself. Because of his prior blasphemy, persecution and insolence, Paul truly regarded himself as the chief of sinners.

The key here for Paul was to clear away all others and to focus only on himself. That is, in fact, precisely how every human being is to apply God's holy law. We are not to grade ourselves on the curve; that is, we are never supposed to comparison shop for worse sinners and thereby to feel better about ourselves. God's holy law is to be applied directly and unambiguously to self, and self alone.

What then are you and I to do with this information from Paul? Are we hereby instructed to take some measure of comfort in the fact that, by divine inspiration, Paul is here listed as the foremost sinner and to thus feel better about ourselves? Obviously not. We are taught to do as Paul did. To look into the mirror of God's law and to honestly evaluate ourselves.

What do you find when you do so? When you do so with absolute candor and honesty? The picture isn't pretty, is it? It cannot be since, like a proper spanking, the law when properly applied will always – must always – sting.

Therefore to do this correctly, we can't think or speak in terms of "we," only in terms of "I." Am I, in fact, the chief of sinners?

Clear away the rest of humanity. With what are you left? Only you. Only "I." Examine that "I," that "me alone," and what Paul experienced comes into sharper focus. Then I stand before my God not in terms of "*How I have done in relation to others?*" but simply "*How have I done?*" In fact if I want to take the godless into account, my guilt is actually compounded, not diminished. Unlike them, I know better. I know and acknowledge both the existence of the living God and his holy will for my life.

Knowing all that is sin, is there a sin of which I am not guilty? I have memorized the Commandments. Is there a single one I have not broken? As a called servant, a shepherd called *by God* to care for his precious lambs, have I shied from the duties that are in most dire need of my attention and care – the admonition and regaining of those who stray? *Knowing* better, have I preached to others the critical importance of that which I myself do not do?

As a dedicated lay man or woman, I also know better. Are my thoughts pure? Do I imagine that my position in the church makes me more worthy of God's grace? Can I examine my day-by-day actions and honestly say to others: "*Do as I do. Follow my example.*"?

Speaking of good examples, I'm assuming you remember the account in Luke 18 of the Pharisee and tax collector in the temple. In abject humility and honest introspection, the tax collector recognized that he had *nothing* to offer a holy God. Because the majority of our translations routinely miss it, in the past you may have missed his example of refusing to hide behind others when we approach our God in repentance. Contrary to how it is often translated, the tax collector did not say, "*God be merciful to me, a sinner.*" He said, "*God be merciful to me, the sinner.*" The law had done its work in his heart, for not only could he not lift his eyes to heaven, he

refused to lift his eyes to the level even of the Pharisee that stood before him – the man who extolled his own virtues to the air and who boasted about his own worthiness and deservedness to himself. How easy it would have been for the tax collector to provide himself with false comfort by comparing himself to the obviously impenitent Pharisee. Had we asked *him*, then and there, I have no doubt that the tax collector would have identified *himself* as chief of sinners.

This is the place where you and I need to arrive. Stripping away all pretense, hypocrisy, and human pride, the law will have done its intended work in my heart when I honestly evaluate myself as the foremost sinner. Chief of sinners. When I honestly come to accept that there truly is no one worse.

And we would then have our answer, wouldn't we. Who is the chief of sinners? I am.

But for one other Bible truth, one addition passage from God's Word, which we are finally ready to hear. A word from the very same man who identified himself in our text as the foremost, or chief, sinner. You heard it just a few minutes ago, since it was part of our New Testament lesson. And yet hearing, did you really hear? Hearing, did it really register? Hear it again: ^{ESV}(**2 Corinthians 5:21**) ***For our sake he (God the Father) made him (Jesus Christ his Son) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.***

Here then we have God's own divine answer to our question, and God's answer represents the beating heart of the gospel itself. The foremost sinner of all time, the absolute chief of sinners, was Jesus Christ. He was this not because of his own sin but because God saw fit to make him guilty of the sum total of every sin committed by the entirety of the human race. Every sin that rightly leads us to cry out, "*God be merciful to me, the sinner*" was placed upon God's Son and carried by him to the cross.

How perfectly Isaiah foretold the amazing trade that would be made – the Lamb taking our sin and we receiving his perfect righteousness. You also heard *these* words a few moments ago, but hear them again in the context of the lesson the Holy Spirit is laying on our hearts this morning. Here is the divine trade of which you and I were beneficiaries: ***He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed***

him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned-- every one-- to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.^{ESV}(Isaiah 53:3-7)

In fact this amazing, divine trade explains *exactly* why Jesus “*opened not his mouth*” in his own defense at his trial. He did not claim innocence because he had been made guilty of every single sin of which he was accused – not because he himself had committed those sins but because others had. Those false accusations he also carried to the cross. Of those too he was made to be guilty.

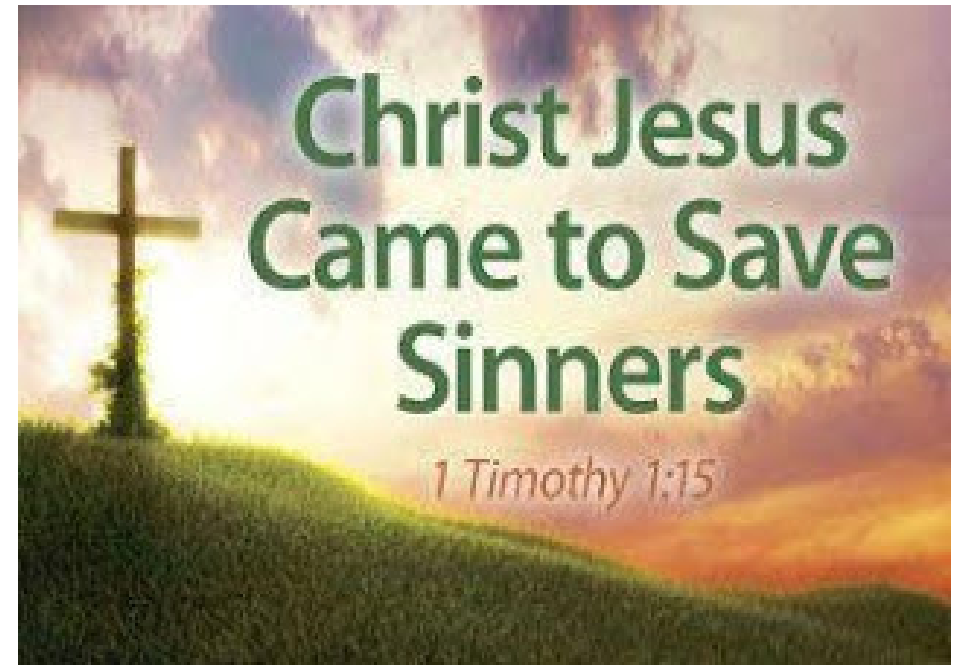
Then and there the great trade was made, for not only did God the Father place all of our sins on Jesus, Paul – the man who regarded himself as the foremost sinner – identified what we received in this divine trade: “**...so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**” That’s what God gave us – “**the righteousness of God**” – forgiveness, pardon, peace. So also in our text this same “chief of sinners” wrote by inspiration: “**And the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 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.**”

Let this peace and comfort be yours, not because you are worthy but because Jesus has paid what you owed. He paid not just for the sins of others, he paid for *yours*. Thank your Savior, praise him alone, as did Paul in the final words of our text: **To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.**

ESV(Isaiah 53:3-7) He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned-- every one-- to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

ESV(2 Corinthians 5:14-21) For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. ¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

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The 17th Sunday after Pentecost – September 15, 2024

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 742 (Brown Hymnal)

"Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Isaiah 53:3-7) Our first reading is the Prophet Isaiah's striking description of the Messiah, who would not appear on earth for another 700 years. Note in particular how this prophecy absolutely rules out any notion that the Promised Savior would come as an earthly ruler, or as one who would come to provide for man's physical needs. He would be sent to pay the debt of sin that we owed.

Psalm 51 (Supplement page 31) (Brown Hymnal)

The Gospel Lesson: (2 Corinthians 5:14-21) In our first reading, the Prophet Isaiah looked forward to the coming Savior. In our second reading the Apostle Paul looks back at the fulfillment of that ancient promise. Jesus is the focal point of all of God's Word. It is faith in the coming Savior by which Old Testament believers were saved, as it is faith in the accomplished fact of that same Savior by which Christians today are also saved. This is the message we have been commissioned by our God to share.

Hymn by the Women's Choir – "Teach Me Thy Way, O Lord"

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 786 (Brown Hymnal)

"Take My Life and Let It Be"

The Sermon – Text: 1 Timothy 1:12-17 (Printed on the back page)

"Chief of Sinners"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 342 (Red Hymnal)

"Chief of Sinners Though I Be"

The Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 47 (Red Hymnal)

"Savior Again to Thy Dear Name We Raise"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States and around the world. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again.

Attendance – Sunday (39) Average (38)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-7:30 a.m.	– Women's Retreat
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting
Mon-Wed	-9:00 a.m.	– CLC Board Meetings in Eau Claire
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor Sam Rodebaugh has accepted the call to St. John's of Okabena, MN. Pastor Zachary Sippert has accepted the call to Grace of Sleepy Eye, MN and is scheduled to be installed on September 29th. St. Stephen of Mountain View has called Pastor Drew Naumann. That congregation also called Pastor Emeritus Mark Gullerud to serve as their vacancy pastor and he has accepted that call. For health reasons, Pastor Timothy Wheaton will retire from the pastoral ministry on September 29th. That congregation has called Pastor Thomas Schuetze to serve as their vacancy pastor.

Welcome! – A warm welcome to all visitors this morning, especially those attending the Fall CLC Women's Retreat. We are honored to have you worship with us.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet this morning during the fellowship hour.

CLC Board Meetings – Pastor Roehl is scheduled to attend synodical board meetings this week in Eau Claire, WI. He is scheduled to return late Wednesday evening.