

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. ¹³ Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴ The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. ¹⁷ Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (NIV 84)

Theme: Of whom I am the worst.

Stephen was chosen as one of seven men to serve the Lord by taking care of some of the work for the Apostles. He didn't just wait on tables—we find out in the book of Acts that was able to perform miracles. And he began to preach the gospel of Christ. But this started and argument with the Jews. And Stephen was sent before the Sanhedrin. In front of this same group who killed Christ Stephen preached a sermon about the history of the Israelites. He talked about how they constantly rebelled against God and rejected the prophets. He then compared the Israelites of old to the Jews of his day who rejected Christ and resisted the Holy Spirit. This made the Jews furious. And they took him outside of the city walls and stoned him to death. There was a man there that day, a young man, holding the cloaks of those who threw the rocks. And as he stood there he looked with approval on what they were doing.

That man's name was Saul. And we learn that soon Saul went out and **destroyed the Church**. He went from house to house and dragged Christians away throwing them into prison. Later he went and got the backing and permission of the high priest to go to Damascus. His plan was to arrest any Christians, bind them in chains, and lead them back to Jerusalem. It was Saul's personal plan to get rid of any one who professed Christ and followed Jesus. Saul was a zealous man—

zealous for what he thought was right. He was trained as a Pharisee. And saw any words or actions contrary to the laws he had learned to be grievous sins against the Lord. And since Christians didn't follow all of the man-made laws of the Pharisees he began to despise Christians. We know Saul the persecutor better as Paul the Apostle. In our text, Paul recalled his past as Saul the persecutor. **I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man.** Paul blasphemed God. That means he mocked God, said all kinds of horrible and detestable things about him. He did this by denying Jesus and mocking his followers. By denying Jesus who is God, Paul blasphemed God. He persecuted his children. Throwing them in jail for confessing Christ. And he didn't just throw them in jail. He did so violently. He physically abused those Christians he arrested. Its no wonder that Paul calls himself the worst of sinners. But really in the Greek Paul calls himself the foremost sinner—or the chief sinner. He is the one who sins the most. Many might play off this comment from Paul as a hyperbole. He's just exaggerating. Sure Paul might have done some bad things in the past, but he certainly isn't the worst sinner. You could probably come up with at least 10 people off the top of your head whom you would label as worse sinners than Paul. I'm sure people like Hitler, Osama Bin Laden, or Nero come to mind.

What about you? Did you come to mind? It should have. Everyone should disagree with Paul. "No Paul, you're not the worst sinner; I am." That is how you should look at yourself And this isn't just because you know your hidden sins. You know all our thoughts. You know all the things you have done in secret. And you don't know the secret sins or the thoughts of others. So when you compare what you know about ourselves to what you know about yourself, of course you are worse. But this is more than a comparison. And it's not just being humble because that is the thing to say. You consider yourself the worst of sinners, because that is what you are. You are the worst of sinners.

"But," you might object, "I haven't been that bad. I've never committed murder. I've never raped anyone or committed adultery. I've never even received a traffic ticket—let alone committed any major crime. So how can I sincerely call myself the worst of sinners?"

Those things may be true. But you still hated someone. You still had indecent thoughts in your head. You still said many horrible and disgusting things. And in God's eyes those sins are just as wicked, deplorable, and punishable, as murder, rape, genocide, or what have you. And so you are the worst of sinners.

Plus, Paul wasn't talking about his former way of life. Notice he said, **of whom I am the worst.** Not of whom I was the worst. Paul looked at himself and his life as it currently sat. Not at all the persecution he had done to the Christians when he was Saul. And he saw himself as a horrible miserable sinner. One who didn't obey God. One who constantly failed to follow God's will. In Romans 7, which Paul wrote about 10 years before this letter, he confessed, **I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.** Paul saw himself as the worst of sinners. And so do you.

And yet Christ saved you. Just like he did Paul. Paul was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians. When suddenly a light from heaven flashed all around him. Then he saw Jesus himself. **Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?** Paul realized that Jesus, whom he had denied and whose children he had been arresting, was true. He is God—the living and almighty Lord. Paul became physically blind. But he was given spiritual sight. A prophet named Ananias was sent to talk to Paul and baptize him. Paul was converted by the Holy Spirit—given faith by the Lord.

That's why Jesus came; as Paul points out in verse 15. **Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.** Christ was sent into this world to save the world. He came not to be a good example for us to follow. He came not to save the Israelites from oppression. He didn't come to change the world by healing diseases or showing compassion to the poor and needy. He came for one primary purpose. And that was to save sinners. To live a perfect life and to give us that perfect life. To take our sins upon himself. To suffer the eternal punishment the world deserves for their sins. To rise from the dead and assure us that we too will be raised from the dead on the Last Day.

Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And that means he came into the world to save you. To save you who is the worst of sinners. To save you who were on your way to eternal damnation. To save you who were helpless to save yourself. Jesus Christ came into this world with one thing in mind—to save you. Just as he saved Paul. But Christ didn't just save Paul. He also made him a minister of the gospel. As he told Ananias, he called Paul to be, **my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.** We know all about Paul's missionary journeys. He went throughout the Mediterranean world spreading the gospel, starting congregations, and saving many. Paul, who had been persecuting those who loved the gospel and arresting Christians, spent the rest of his life spreading the gospel so that the Holy Spirit could make followers of Christ! Paul didn't deserve any of it. He didn't deserve to be called a child of God, let alone an Apostle of Christ.

That is mercy. Paul didn't earn any of it. Look at what he had been doing. He was a violent persecutor of God's children. Paul was quick to point out that he didn't deserve any of these gifts from God. Just as he didn't do anything to be saved.. **I was shown mercy...The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.**

Why did God show such mercy to Paul? So that we might see his love and his never ending patience. **For that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.** In Paul we see an example of how Jesus deals with us. God didn't strike Paul down. He was patient with him. He gave him time to turn from his evil ways and follow the Lord. He brought him to faith and led him to repentance. He has done the same for you. Peter makes that same point in the third chapter of his second letter. **The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.** Before he was Paul the Apostle he was Saul the persecutor. Moses was chosen to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Before that he was a murder who had to flee the county. Matthew was a tax collector when he was called by Christ. And tax collectors were notorious cheats and

thieves. Let's throw in David—the author of our psalm. He committed adultery and then to cover it up, he became guilty of murder. So you have a murderer, a tax collector, a violent persecutor of Christians, and an adulterer/ murderer. All four of them God saved, out of his grace and mercy—not because of how good they were. All four of them the Lord chose to lead his people. He chose them all to share his Word. And to write his Word. Did you notice that all four of these men are the same ones who wrote our lessons. So a murderer, a tax collector, a violent persecutor, and a adulterer/murderer writers of Scriptures.

The power and effectiveness of the gospel didn't come from the authors of Scripture. And it doesn't come from those who share the gospel. It comes from God. God has called me to spread the gospel. But I am the worst of sinners. I don't deserve to be called his child, let alone a shepherd of his flock. But it doesn't depend on who I am, but on Christ. The same stands for you. As a Christian God has called you to share the gospel with everyone you know. And you are the worst of sinners. But it doesn't depend on you, but on Christ. So be faithful to the gospel and share it with others whenever you get the chance so the Holy Spirit may do his work.

What grace and mercy God has showed you! He saved you. And he has given you the privilege of sharing the gospel with others. So you say the same thing as Paul. And you sing his praises. You can't help but do so. You can't help but to break out in thanks and praise. For he has shown you compassion. He has had mercy on you, the worst of sinners. And he has promised you eternal life. So you know that through faith you will live with him in heaven forever. And so you can say along with Paul, **To the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.**