

Four men shape the reading we have today from 1 Timothy. All have something to say about the life of the Church. And two of them have excluded themselves—with their theology and behavior—from the Church’s communion.

The Church is our topic this summer. And it is the gathering of God’s people around Word and Sacrament. We are letting Paul’s Epistle—1 Timothy—as one of the Pastoral Epistles—alongside 2 Timothy and Titus—lead the way. And today, the direction of our texts calls us to a right faith and a good conscience. And these realities have a particular source.

Before Paul became a follower of Jesus Christ, he thought he was doing the right thing. But you know the saying, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” He was critical of the followers of Jesus. He thought they were the blasphemers. He had them imprisoned. He was there when Stephen was martyred.

He persecuted the followers of Christ in the name of the God of Israel. He thought he was being faithful—but he lacked true faith. He failed to recognize the Messiah—even though he knew the Scriptures. Paul even tells us that he acted in ignorance. This isn’t an excuse. He was sincere—but he was also sincerely wrong.

And it is in this context that Paul tells of the mercy he needs. He needs forgiveness. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—and he calls himself *the foremost*. Or as our hymn today suggests—*the chief of sinners*. The grace of God overflowed to him—with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Now, Paul even says that he used to be a blasphemer. That word comes up again in our reading, so it is worth defining. The word can just refer to the act of slandering someone. But Paul often uses it to address slander and judgment directed at Jesus Christ. In fact, this is the word used for those who mock Jesus at the crucifixion. And it suggests a real problem. It is the exaltation of self over and against the divine. It is thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think—especially regarding spiritual things.

Now, we probably don’t think of Paul like that. And rightly so. Even before his conversion on the road to Damascus, he was someone we would typically admire. He was a Roman Citizen—a Hebrew of Hebrews—zealous for the Law. It is easy to pinpoint so many other people who were much worse sinners.

But I think Paul’s thinking is right. And there is something for us to learn in how we talk about ourselves—how we think about ourselves. We live in a culture of positivism—at least on the surface—where we are only supposed to have positive self-talk. Meanwhile, we tear others apart privately—on the phone—on social media. We have been taught to think too highly of ourselves.

Paul was there. But now he sees things rightly. He sees his own sin—He sees the grace he needs.

In Luke 7, Jesus is invited to the home of a Pharisee named Simon. A woman of the city somehow joined them. You can just see her sneaking in because Jesus is there. You know the story. She washes Jesus feet with her hair and tears. And everyone is all upset by her lack of morality—and now her lack of propriety.

But Jesus helps them make sense of this encounter. He tells this story to explain her actions, “A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

He then summarizes. “Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” Notice that Jesus doesn’t affirm her sin. She has many sins—and Jesus speaks His forgiveness in the very next verse. But she knows her condition—and she knows the great deliverance that Jesus brings.

We must see ourselves like Paul—we must see ourselves like this woman of the city—as great sinners in need of a great Savior. The Scriptures call us to a keen awareness of our own personal sin. It requires some honesty. We have to stop lying to ourselves. We have to confess some hard things. We need an openness to the kind of guilt that will lead us to repentance. We need to throw ourselves at the feet of Jesus. There is no other way.

Paul summarizes this very well, “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.”

Paul wants to guide us to humility before Jesus Christ—and to a great love for Jesus Christ—based on what He has done for us sinners. The one who is forgiven much loves much. This is the basis of the whole message of the Church. And it leaves us with a great love for Christ—for the things of Christ—for His Church—and even for one another. The bitterness, the blame, the critical spirit—even the compromised morality—are all washed away in God’s grace.

And Paul’s condition before and after His conversion helps us to make sense of what is going on with Hymenaeus and Alexander—the men mentioned in our text. Remember that 1 Timothy is a letter written by Paul to Timothy about the life of the Church in Ephesus. Paul had left Timothy there to pastorally lead this congregation.

The Epistle is occasioned by Paul’s fear that false teachers are undermining the Apostles’ testimony in Ephesus. And he gets specific—because it matters that much. For Paul, the community’s rule of faith is found in faithful interpretation of God’s glorious Gospel, entrusted to him and the other Apostles. And everything is centered on Christ Jesus, who came into the world to save sinners.

These false teachers are preoccupied with myths, speculations, and endless conspiracies—as we heard last week—rather than with the faithful management of God’s household. And now, in our text, we see that these men have rejected both a good conscience and a sincere faith. Here, Paul references a bad mixture of heresy and personal evil.

Maybe these men meant well. Maybe they had noble intentions of fixing the Church, bringing their faith up to date. But instead, Hymenaeus and Alexander made a shipwreck of the faith—of their faith—they ruined everything—and they made a mess in the Church—with their lives and teachings.

And Paul gets specific. He names names. And not just once. We hear about Alexander again in 2 Timothy 4. Here, Paul says, “Alexander the coppersmith did me great

harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.”

We hear about Hymenaeus again in 2 Timothy 2. Here, Paul says, “But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.”

And here we get a taste of what is going on. The conversations these men are having are irreverent. It is blasphemy. They lack respect for God and for His Church. They don’t understand the truth. Their influence is like a disease rather than a blessing to the Church.

And specifically, we find a false teaching about the resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul deals with the resurrection and errors about the resurrection. He deals with details about the return of Christ in 2 Thessalonians. People were teaching that Christ’s return had already occurred. And the implication is that it happened in secret. And you missed it. And these kinds of groundless heresies were upsetting the faithful.

What we believe about faith, and truth, and life matters. It shapes us either positively or negatively. False teachings always bring division. And this is why we work so hard to have a clear and pure confession of faith. This is why we have creeds in our worship. This is why the Small Catechism continues to inform our lives.

And the Church is so important that Paul delivers these men over to Satan. Paul uses exactly the same language in 1 Corinthians 5 with a man caught up in horrible immorality. He, too, was handed over to Satan. This isn’t persecution—it is excommunication. And notice the spiritual dimension to this.

These two men could no longer be considered part of the Church. And this is a warning about how dangerous it is to be caught outside of the Church of Jesus Christ. This isn’t just exclusion; it is the announcement that their sins are not forgiven. This is the binding key—in the office of the keys. They are being returned to the domain of Satan. Every single person is either under the rule and reign of Christ—or the rule and reign of Satan. There are no other options.

But there is a purpose. Paul is not just mean or judgmental or intolerant. He hasn’t forgotten his own need for grace. This act actually serves the good Hymenaeus and Alexander. These men need to learn not to blaspheme—they need to learn not to promote false teachings—or encourage immoral living. Paul intends to destroy the sinful natures and save their souls.

And then their excommunication is meant to save the congregation—the Church in Ephesus—from their corrupting contamination. False doctrine—and unholy living—are not to be tolerated. It serves as a warning for others tempted into such errant ways.

And finally, it is to bring them to an awareness of their sin—thus leading them to repent. It is a wake-up call for them to come in line with the apostolic testimony concerning the things of God. Paul wants them to repent and believe the Gospel. It happens with the man at Corinth. Perhaps these two will turn back to Christ—and come under the authority of the Church.

So, we have given some time to Paul—and Hymenaeus and Alexander—but let's give just a little time to Timothy as well. And we will talk about him more in the weeks to come. Of course, he lives with sound doctrine and a godly life. Paul calls Timothy, “my true child in the faith.” And the reference to prophecy here is significant. It shows a line of apostolic authority from the first generation to the next. Timothy had the benefit of Paul's instruction and even direct revelation. He has a unique foundation for his work in the Church at Ephesus.

Paul sees that Timothy has a battle to fight. The Church battles for the truth and for the Gospel. There is a spiritual conflict that undergirds the trouble from Hymenaeus and Alexander. In our passage, Paul tells Timothy to “wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience.”

You will recognize this language from last week as Paul says back in verse five, “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” This is where good theology leads. This is the shape of a sound Church. And even when the Church corrects and disciplines, it is to be handled as a pathway to repentance. The goal is restoration and a sound confession of faith in the world.

I love that Paul includes doxology right in the middle of this text. Last week we distinguished between the orthodox and the heterodox—between sound teaching and something other than sound teaching—between right worship and something other than right worship. The term doxology comes from this same word. And this is right worship.

I think this is a sign of true faith—to worship as God has decreed. A worship that receives all that God has for His people in Jesus Christ. Even as Paul speaks of the ignorance of his own former ways—and the struggles he finds in those who continue in blasphemy—he is still amazed by the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus. The Good News shines especially bright in the midst of the darkness of sin and error.

We find his language here shaping some of our other hymns—hymns we did not sing tonight. He affirms the nature of God as a sound confession. And I will let his praise serve as our conclusion. He says, “To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*