

One of the things that many older Christians find upsetting is the decision by some publishers to change the lyrics, the words, of well-known hymns to supposedly make them easier to sing or to replace original words with words that are more common or acceptable in this day and age. Consider the change made by one publisher to John Newton's famous hymn, "Amazing Grace". The first line of the hymn was changed to read, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved and strengthened me!" There is a grace that strengthens but Newton was talking about a grace that does more than strengthens - he was praising God for the grace that saves. In the original, therefore, Newton identified himself as the worst of sinners: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!" While John Newton believed that human beings were wretches in desperate need of a Saviour, the adapter of the hymn published in the late 20th century believed that he and the congregations who would sing his new words were not that bad - certainly not wretches. They have simply lost their way. Downplaying the depravity of human beings - just how wicked and deeply sinful we are - has the result of minimizing the amazing grace of God.

1. Grace to Serve

There is a difference between God's saving grace and his strengthening grace, isn't there? We need God's saving grace to become a Christian, don't we? And Paul talks about that in vv.13-16. But God saves us so that we might serve the Lord in his church and in his kingdom. And what a Christian needs for service or ministry is God's strengthening grace, a grace that Paul, the apostle, had received: "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service" (v.12). When it comes to serving the Lord believers need God's power, his help, his grace. Paul's effectiveness as a missionary did not depend on natural talent, a first-rate education, or following the latest Christian fads. Rather, he was spiritually empowered. First Christ appointed him to serve as an apostle; then Christ gave him the strength to serve. What amazed Paul is that God had trusted him with this ministry at all! Paul was not worthy or fit for such an office. Who could ever be worthy of being an apostle? But God fitted him for the office, God gave him the grace he needed to be trustworthy in carrying it out.

What comes through strongly in v.12 is Paul's thankfulness to God for the privilege of serving as an apostle. Surely this is an example for every Christian? Do you praise God for the ministry he has given you in your family, in your church or in the world? When you do the laundry, drive the kids to school, go to work or school or university, serve morning tea or lunch here at church, or teach in Sunday School, Youth Group or a home group, thank God for the high privilege of serving in his name. Sometimes we grow ungrateful because we are tired of ministry. We complain about having to serve the Lord rather than thanking him for the privilege he has given us. On other occasions we are too proud to be grateful. We are tempted to think that God should thank us for our spiritual service. Like Paul we need to be humble. He was not bashful about his credentials as an apostle but he never lost his sense of personal unworthiness for ministry, or his profound gratitude for the privilege of serving God. What about you? Do you thank God for the high privilege of serving in the name of Christ? For giving you the grace and strength to serve?

2. Grace Abounding

Before Paul became an apostle, he needed to be saved. Only God's amazing grace could save a wretch like him. In vv.13-16 Paul gives a short personal testimony of his conversion to faith in Jesus Christ, the transformation that brought him from past sinfulness to present service. Paul begins with his terrible past, describing himself as "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man" (v.13). Before he came to faith in Christ Paul was a thoroughly disreputable individual. From his perspective in those days, attempting to wipe out the church was one of the best ways for him to serve God. This is how he put it in his testimony to King Agrippa in Acts 26: "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and

when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them” (Acts 26:9-11).

Then Paul came to Christ. A Christian testimony is a story of God’s grace overcoming a man’s sin. So Paul tells the “after” as well as the “before”. He explains “I was shown mercy”. Mercy refers especially to the forgiveness of sins, and Paul received this mercy when he met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. There God forgave Paul for all his violence, all his blasphemy, and all his persecutions. Why did Paul receive this mercy? Paul goes on to say, “I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief” (v.13). Before he became a Christian, Paul hardly knew what he was doing. In fact, when he met Jesus on the Damascus road, he was so surprised that he said, “Who are you, Lord?” (Acts 9:5). He was persecuting Christ almost unwittingly. This does not mean that Paul’s ignorance and unbelief somehow qualified him for salvation, or made his actions any less sinful. He was guilty - God never excuses sin because of mitigation circumstances. Nevertheless, God had pity on Paul’s desperate spiritual condition - his ignorance and unbelief. Paul received mercy because God is merciful.

God has great mercy on those who have yet to receive the message of salvation. They are still responsible for their sins, of course, but God pities their spiritual ignorance. When John Bunyan, the famous author of “The Pilgrim’s Progress”, experienced this same mercy he wrote, “though I was such a great sinner before conversion, yet God never much charged the guilt of the sins of my ignorance upon me, only he showed me I was lost if I had not Christ because I had been a sinner”.

When Paul was converted, he not only received mercy, but he also received grace: “the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (v.14). Grace is the undeserved, unmerited favour of God, which Paul received in superabundance. Abounding grace is grace that overflows - a mighty torrent of divine favour that cannot be contained. We just sang about it in Julia Johnston’s hymn, “Marvellous grace of our loving Lord”. That hymn reminds us that God’s abundant grace was poured out in the life blood of Jesus Christ. The grace which abounds flows from his cross.

Grace was not the only thing Paul received in abundance, however. His testimony is that “the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” came along with that grace. Paul is referring to faith in Christ and love for God. In the earlier verses of chapter 1, he had condemned the false teachers for turning away from faith and love (vv.4-6). By contrast, he himself received faith and love when he came to Christ. This contrast highlights the true gospel over against the false gospel of the false teachers.

The various benefits of salvation in Christ cannot be separated, for with him it is all or nothing. Anyone who knows Jesus Christ has grace, and faith, and love, and everything else Christ has to offer. Whoever does not know him does not have his grace, or his faith, or his love. Every spiritual blessing comes in and with Jesus Christ. Even faith comes from God. God holds out the free gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ, but we are too sinful to take it. Our hands are curled up in defiance and rebellion. So God takes us firmly by the wrist, uncurls our fingers, presses his grace into our hands, and wraps our fingers back around it. We lay hold of eternal life with the hand of faith, but God opens the hand.

Paul is the perfect example. After he saw the glory of the risen Christ on the Damascus road, he was blind for 3 days. He fasted and prayed, waiting for God to save him. Then Ananias laid his hands on Paul in the name of Jesus, giving him sight and filling him with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17). It was all the gracious work of God from beginning to end, and Paul depended on that grace for the rest of his life.

3. The Chief of Sinners

In its spiritual dynamic of sin and grace, Paul's personal testimony is basically the story of every Christian. Paul is only one in a long line of unpromising sinners who became productive servants in the kingdom of God. The apostle thus takes his personal experience and applies it to every Christian: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst" (v.15). This sounds like a slogan from the early church, possibly from a hymn or creed or catechism. This popular saying is indeed a true saying, says Paul - Jesus Christ really did come into the world to save sinners.

This truth deserves to be wholeheartedly accepted, and by everyone, because it contains the whole gospel, from the incarnation to the atonement. "Christ Jesus came into the world" - this speaks to the fact of the incarnation, of God becoming a man. He did it for this reason: "to save sinners" - that is, to deliver them from sin and death. The very reason Christ came into the world was to deliver his people from sin. He atoned for their sins by the blood he shed on the cross.

Then Paul added a phrase to make that trusty gospel personal: "sinners, of whom I am the worst". In this phrase the apostle literally identifies himself as the "first" (protos) of sinners, meaning that he was the "worst" or "foremost" or "chief" sinner of them all. But he also invites us to put ourselves in his shoes, as if to say, "Repeat after me: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst"." Jesus Christ did not just come to save sinners in general - he came to save me in particular! Becoming a Christian means making a personal commitment to Christ and a personal confession of sin. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" - this is a universal truth. "Of whom I am the worst" - this is the universal truth applied to my situation. We are not able to receive God's grace until we admit we are sinners, because Jesus Christ came to save sinners. As Jesus said himself, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). Do you believe that you are among the worst of sinners? That when Jesus died on the cross he paid the price for your sins?

Just as he had once said that he was the "least of the apostles" (1 Corinthians 15:9), and the "least of all the saints" (Ephesians 3:8), now Paul says that he is the least, the worst, of all the sinners. The apostle was coming to a deeper awareness of his utter sinfulness, and at the same time he was growing in grace and service to God. As one writer has put it - "Believers who are the most desperate about themselves are the ones who express most forcefully their confidence in grace.... those who are the most pessimistic about man are the most optimistic about God; those who are the most severe with themselves are the ones who have the most serene confidence in divine forgiveness.... By degrees the awareness of our guilt and of God's love increase side by side".

Some people thank God that they are not the worst of sinners - that in comparison with others they are living quite a good life. However, these people do not happen to be Christians. Consider the parable that Jesus taught "to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else" (Luke 18:9) - the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:10-14). Jesus could hardly have made it any clearer: those who are confident about their own righteousness are not justified, not right with God. Unless you consider yourself the worst of sinners - knowing that the sinful attitudes in your heart are as dishonouring to a perfectly holy God as any sins can be - you are still learning what it means to be a Christian, because genuine Christians are firmly convinced of the wickedness of their sin. What the tax collector said is significant. Literally, he said, "God, have mercy on me, the sinner". He was so painfully aware of his sin that it was as if he were the only sinner in the whole world. It is a hopeful thing to know that we are sinners, because "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners". The only thing you can contribute to your salvation is the sin from which Christ came to save you. Christianity is the only religion in the world that is realistic about our human condition - that we are bad people, that our human sinfulness is an expression of a bad

heart, a heart in rebellion against God. In one way or another, every other religion says that people can become good enough for God. But Christianity tells us we need a new heart, we need our lives to be transformed by God. That is why he sent Jesus into the world - to offer us real hope. Jesus Christ is the only one who can or will save us, because he came into the world to save sinners.

The worst of sinners find mercy and abundant grace in Jesus Christ. In case any further encouragement to come to Christ is needed, Paul uses himself as an example: "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" (v.16). Paul's point is that if God can transform the worst of sinners into an apostle, there must be no limit to the power of his grace. Even a bully, and a murderer, and a sworn enemy of Christ can become a servant of God. If God can save Paul, of all people, then he can save anyone!

With all this encouragement, there is only one thing left to do: believe in Jesus Christ. Paul is the prototype for those who "believe in him for eternal life". It is not enough to believe you are a sinner unless you also take Christ for a Saviour. Everyone who believes in him receives eternal life.

At the start of this sermon I quoted the opening words of John Newton's hymn, "Amazing Grace". That hymn was written from personal experience, for Newton himself was among the worst of sinners. At the age of 11 he took to the sea, where he had many adventures: he was press-ganged into the navy, he was captured and flogged for desertion, he despaired almost to the point of suicide. Eventually he became a slave-trader, a hard and wicked man. But he was shown mercy. As he feared for his life in stormy seas, he threw himself on the grace of God, which he found in abundance.

Our need for the gospel does not cease when we first receive it. Because we are still sinners, we need to go back to the good news of God's mercy every day. After he was saved, Newton continued to confess his need of God's amazing grace. He wrote in one of his letters, "In defiance of my best judgment and best wishes, I find something within me which cherishes and cleaves to those evils, from which I ought to start and flee, as I should if a toad or a serpent was put in my food or in my bed. Ah! How vile the heart (at least my heart) must be". Newton did not despair, however. Before closing the letter, he quoted Paul's words to Timothy: "I embrace it as a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners".

Can you complete Newton's quotation in the quietness of a believing heart: "of whom I am the worst"?

Amen

Prepared by Rev. Grant Lawry, Canterbury Presbyterian Church, Canterbury, Melbourne, Australia for use of the Canterbury congregation.