

If we ran the numbers here this morning based on the demographics of the state of Oklahoma we would expect to find a little more than half of you would be female. Roughly a quarter of you would be under the age of eighteen. Around seven percent would be under the age of five. Most of you would still be living in the same house today as you were a year ago, at least eighty percent of you. Close to twenty percent of those twenty five years old or more would have a bachelor's degree. And just about seventy percent of you would own your home.

Looking at a demographic makeup of a congregation or community can help someone know the people better and serve them better. We might imagine Paul would have loved to know the detailed demographic makeup of the congregations he served. With or without that information he writes to Timothy in the second lesson offering encouragement to the young pastor. He instructs him about running a church, avoiding false teaching, and what to look for as far as sin goes. There's one stat that Paul doesn't need a demographic study to tell him, one thing Paul could say about the church Timothy served as well as this congregation of believers.

**Church is full of people called by grace
Sinners changed to saints
People who want to give thanks**

A new guy is introduced at the office. You go say hi and ask some basic questions. He tells you he's single, worked a few other similar places, and he's really excited to be working here. Then quietly he shares he was just released from prison. Instantly your feelings towards this person might change. Truth is everybody's got a past they can't get rid of. The best we can hope for is to hide it as long as we can. The apostle Paul did exactly the opposite. **"I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man..."** His was a past most would try to forget. It was checkered to say the least.

At one point in his life Paul persecuted Christians. He arrested people for believing in Christ. He threw people into prison. A few he even was present when they were stoned to death. And Paul didn't think twice about it. He lost no sleep over what he was doing. Paul was an unbeliever. Well he did believe that he was doing God's work. Paul believed that keeping the law was the only way to get right with God.

Such an evil person we would expect would get everything they deserve. Like a murderer who gets life in prison, we wouldn't have minded too much to hear Paul stricken with some disease. But that's not what happened. **"I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."** What!?! God's mercy extended over a man like Paul who did horrible things to believers? God certainly didn't approve, but he didn't give up on Paul either. Jesus met Paul and turned his life around. Paul went from hating Christians to being one. He went from hating Jesus to loving and proclaiming Jesus. Paul owed everything to Christ Jesus.

What sins from your past would you like to forget? The little white lies you convinced yourself didn't hurt anyone. The guilty feelings for a sin you haven't quite put behind you. The regret of hurting someone else. Add them all up and we know we're pretty bad people. Coming clean is what hurts because we've hurt others, and we've hurt God. Will he hold it against me? Will he forgive or forget? Our sins cut us off from a relationship with him. Sin separates us from Jesus. We may not be the worst sinner, but it sure can feel like it sometimes.

Consider your mountain of sins; how those sins have hurt others and God. But listen because God didn't give up on you. **"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."** It was for you that Christ Jesus came here to this world. You're a sinner who was shown mercy. That mercy was based on God's grace to you. God's grace in Christ created faith. And faith is your personal connection to the forgiveness Christ won. These blessings come to us who don't deserve it. And Christ Jesus has grace that overflows. Grace meets every one of your sins and then some. Now you're a saint. You're perfect in God's eyes because of Christ. You're completely washed of your sins because of Jesus. A sinner changed to a saint.

Think of the change required to get a caterpillar to a butterfly. A beautiful butterfly and a crawling sluglike thing with many legs and hair look nothing alike. That change demonstrates the level of change required to get a sinner to a saint. One wicked evil sinner wanting to do nothing God demands looks nothing like a beautiful perfect saint that wants to only do what God demands. Paul perfectly illustrates this change. He went from sinner to saint and he couldn't have been happier. That led him and all believers like him to want to be people who want to give thanks.

For many of you your day begins and ends in the same place, your bed. It might even include some words of thanks to God for the new day and for the day that has concluded. Paul begins and ends our section in the same place, with thanks to God. His starting point is really thanks to the one who brought him to where he's at. **"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service."** Paul did nothing to change himself; in fact he didn't want to change. But Christ changed him and deserved the thanks. That would've been enough for Paul, to become a believer and be guaranteed heaven. But Christ's blessings seem to continue. The extra measure of grace Paul received made him a servant of the gospel. So Paul ends where he began, with thanks.

When your parents forgave you for breaking the lamp because you were wrestling in the house it would have been hard for them to forgive you again if you went right back and started wrestling and broke a different lamp. Or if you acted up in school and got detention day after day it would really start to try their patience. When we keep going back to the same sins or allow ourselves to slip into spiritual apathy where we simply don't care what we do against God or anybody else it tries God's patience. And if we say it doesn't matter or we think to ourselves that we're not as bad as some other people we stretch God's patience with us too.

Think of how much patience Jesus showed as he watched Paul persecute and put to death Christians on a daily basis. Easily Paul declared himself the worst of sinners. But he also says, **"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."** Jesus waited patiently demonstrating his grace. That same grace is on display in your life. As you doubt God's existence, he's waiting, patiently working on you through a loving believing spouse. As you continue to fall into the same sinful trap, Jesus continues to show you grace by extending forgiveness yet again. Christ Jesus went to the very bottom of the sinners pile to get Paul. He had to go to the cross. He had to pay for all sins, yours, mine, and Paul's. Christ was longsuffering, going to extreme lengths to show you mercy and win you. He showed mercy and it worked.

We've read Paul's words; we've heard him share how thankful he was, and Paul was the worst of sinners. You're not. But you are a sinner saved by grace. Now is our time for thanks, thanks for our longsuffering Savior. Thanks to remember our sins so we never go back. Thanks to repent when we do sin. Thanks to seek forgiveness from the one we hurt, both here on earth and our Father in heaven. Thanks in not letting the painful memories of our past sins haunt us, but taking them instead to the Savior's cross. There his grace shines on us.

No matter how many statistics you found to describe this congregation there would always be one statistic that would never change. Here we have a bunch of sinners changed into saints. Here we have a bunch of people looking to give thanks to God for the good things he has done for them. Here we have a church full of people called by grace.