

## **Was Paul the Worst Sinner Ever?**

*by: Kris Brewer*

*This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. (1 Timothy 1:15)*

Much has been made of Paul's statement in this verse, identifying himself as chief among sinners. Many use the fact that Paul used the present tense, even though this was long after he obeyed the gospel, to make the argument that he was still identifying himself as a "sinner." The implication is that all sin (Romans 3:23) and therefore continue to be "sinners." After all, if Paul (perceived to be the greatest of the apostles) was identifying himself as a "sinner," then surely every other Christian should do the same. This line of thinking has led many to become almost boastful in their declaration, "I am a sinner!"

It is important to look more closely at this passage and decipher what Paul was saying as he wrote to Timothy. Was

he declaring that he was, at that point in time, a "sinner"? Or does an examination of his writings here, as well as in other epistles, reveal a different idea? It is easy, with a mere cursory reading of this verse, to think that Paul was identifying himself as a sinner, but is that the message he really wanted the reader to take away from his writing?

### **What is a Sinner?**

First, we must consider the use of the term "sinner" by the inspired writers. What does this word typically denote? Paul used this same term earlier in this context:

*...knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, (1 Timothy 1:9)*

*Strong's Enhanced Lexicon* defines this word as:

268 ἁμαρτωλός [hamartolos /ham•ar•to•los/] adj. From 264; TDNT 1:317; TDNTA 51; GK 283; 47 occurrences; AV translates as “sinner” 43 times, and “sinful” four times. 1 devoted to sin, a sinner. 1A not free from sin. 1B pre-eminently sinful, especially wicked. 1B1 all wicked men. 1B2 specifically of men stained with certain definite vices or crimes. 1B2A tax collectors, heathen. <sup>1</sup>

Strong’s makes it clear that this is a word that is identifying those who are continuing in sin, those who have not been freed from sin. Merely being guilty of sin does not make one a “sinner” as used in New Testament scripture. Those who obey the gospel and choose to walk in the light (1 John 1:5-8) are not identified as “sinners.” That is a term used in the New Testament to identify those who are wicked, those who walk in darkness, and those who refuse to repent and continue in their sins (see Romans 5:8, Hebrews 12:3, James 5:20, 1 Peter 4:18). This certainly does not describe the Paul that was writing to Timothy at the time that he penned that epistle. It does, however, describe his previous life in fighting against the gospel message! We must, therefore, examine the context of Paul’s statement to Timothy and determine what aspect of his life Paul was discussing.

### ***From the context...***

When we consider the context of 1 Timothy 1:12-16, it becomes clear that Paul was not discussing his current life as a Christian, but rather his previous life as a persecutor of Christians. He was discussing the grace and mercy of God, which allowed him to enter the ministry of Jesus Christ even after he had been guilty of tremendous sin. Verse 13 of this context drives this point home:

*...although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. (1 Timothy 1:13)*

This was the life that Paul lived prior to obeying the gospel of Christ. It was during that period of time that he received the grace of Christ of which he wrote, and was released from his life as a sinner! Notice, continuing into verse 14, that Paul said that “the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.” Paul was not saying that grace was no longer needed after he became a Christian. He was not addressing that point at all. He was addressing the fact that he received the grace of Jesus that allowed him to be forgiven of the sins he listed previously in the context.

Verse 15, with which we are specifically concerned in this study, appears to be a

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1 Strong, J. (1995). *Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon*. Woodside Bible Fellowship.

statement made by Paul as an emphasis of the main point that he has been making: Jesus came to save sinners. This is a point that was clearly made by Jesus himself:

*And when the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to His disciples, "How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard it, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." (Mark 2:16-17)*

Of course, the Jews did not realize that they were sinners in need of the great physician, just as the tax collectors and notorious sinners that they thought they were better than. Paul, on the other hand, came to know that he was among those sinners and was in need of God's grace. Now, as he wrote to Timothy, he was emphasizing the universal nature of the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus came into the world for a particular purpose: to save sinners. Before Jesus came into the world, all men were consumed by sin! There was no sacrifice that would take away sin before Christ:

*For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. (Hebrews 10:1-4)*

Jesus was the sacrifice, sent by God to be offered for sin. When He came into the world, it was to save all mankind. Any who would be saved would be saved through Him. All that would be saved were among those identified as "sinners," desperately in need of this sacrifice. Paul, as he cited the purpose of Christ to come into the world (i.e., to save sinners) declared that he was indeed chief among that group of people who was in need of that sacrifice. There are two issues that must be addressed with Paul's statement.

First, Paul wrote in the present tense, so does that indicate he was identifying himself (despite the evidence to the contrary from other passages) as the chief of sinners even after his conversion? Marshall Patton, in his commentary on 1 Timothy provides some valuable insight into the Paul's statement here:

*The word **chief** (prōtos) identifies Paul's relation to a group of which he was a part or to which he belonged. Wuest says, "The words, 'of whom I am chief,' are literally, 'of*

whom, I, in contradistinction to others, am foremost.” The **whom** of which Paul was a part has for its antecedent the sinners Jesus came to save. This includes everybody, not just an elect number, according to Calvinian theology (cf. Matt. 11:28; Heb. 2:9; Rev. 22; 3:17). I am, you are, and everybody is of that number whom Jesus came to save. Of this number Paul said, **I am chief**. This expression denotes Paul’s deep sense of unworthiness, not because of his present life, but because of his past. Paul could not forget how serious and how awful was his sinful conduct. He had been a blasphemer, persecutor, and injurious. While Paul sinned after his conversion, as all Christians do (now and then), at no time after his conversion can the expression “I am chief of sinners” be applied to his life in Christ.

As a Christian Paul said, “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Again, “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? (Rom. 6: 1-2). John says, “My little children these things write I unto you that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous... If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 2: 1; 1:9). Christians are not “chief of sinners,” unless they have become an apostate.

According to what some brethren say, in their prayers and in their teaching, one might think that Christians are “chief of sinners.” They say, “Father, forgive us our many, many sins.” Again, they speak so as to imply that Christians sin every hour of the day, more or less. This, of course, is not so. Christians are different from the world. In becoming a Christian, through repentance, one makes the decision to quit sinning. While now and then, in spite of his desire to do otherwise, he fails of this objective, he is not a sinner above all others. While we need to maintain a sense of unworthiness at all times, we at the same time need to guard against saying anything that would leave a false impression.<sup>2</sup>

Paul was not making any kind of declaration about his current life as a Christian! He was declaring himself to be among the number that Jesus came into the world to save. Of course, we are all among that number!

This brings us to the second point that needs to be considered. What did Paul mean when he identified himself as “chief” among this number? Many conclude that Paul was identifying himself as the worst of the sinners. Reaching this conclusion, one would have to believe that Paul literally thought that there had never been any sinner worse than he, or else one would have to conclude that Paul was

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2 Patton, Marshall. *Truth Commentaries, The Books of 1&2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. Guardian of Truth Foundation 2001. PP. 26-27

speaking in hyperbole, with a strong sense of self deprecation. However, neither of these are the case! Paul, in using the word “chief” was not trying to declare that he was the worst possible sinner, but rather that he was a predominant sinner. The word *chief*, according to *Strong’s Enhanced Lexicon*, means:

4413 πρῶτος [protos /pro-tos/] adj. Contracted superlative of 4253; TDNT 6:865; TDNTA 965; GK 4755; 105 occurrences; AV translates as “first” 85 times, “chief” nine times, “first day” twice, “former” twice, and translated miscellaneous seven times. 1 first in time or place. 1A in any succession of things or persons. 2 first in rank. 2A influence, honour. 2B chief. 2C principal. 3 first, at the first<sup>3</sup>

This is the same word that is used in verse 16 of this context, where Paul said:

*However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. (1 Timothy 1:16)*

Paul was obviously not declaring that he was the first person to receive the mercy of Christ! His point is that he was in a prominent position, one that others would look at and realize that if he received mercy and grace, then they could as well. In the preceding verse, the word “chief,” as translated in our English translations, denotes the same concept. Paul was not the worst sinner who ever lived, but he was in a prominent position before both the Jews and the Christians. Everyone knew where he came from and what he had done in his past life. As such, he was in a unique position, in which he was at the forefront of both groups. His use of the word “chief” was not to identify severity, but rather prominence and influence.

### ***Concluding thoughts...***

Paul’s identification of himself as chief among sinners was not an attempt at self deprecation. It was not intended to be a declaration of some sinful nature. It certainly was not identifying that he was continuing in sinful practices as a way or manner of life. There are too many contrary passages to accept such a premise (only some of which have been cited in this study). If Paul was not using the phrase in such a way, we should not use it in that manner today. If we are baptized believers, truly converted to Christ, we should never try to identify ourselves as “chief among sinners.” If this phrase truly describes who we are, then we are not being the kind of Christians that God intends us to be! We may stumble, but living in sin is a thing of the past! (See Romans 6, 1 John 1.)

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3 Strong, J. (1995). *Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon*. Woodside Bible Fellowship.

# *Choose This Day*

*by: Justin Brewer*

Recently, I wrote a short “article” for my Facebook profile in which a small part of Joshua 24 was utilized. Often, when we look to this passage, our focus is on the words of Joshua in verse 15 where he says, “...as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” This is a wonderful sentiment, but we are honestly doing this passage an injustice if we ignore the context in which Joshua said these words and ignore that attitude and zeal through which he pushed the children of Israel to serve the Lord.

Throughout the first 13 verses, Joshua reminds the children of Israel about the wonderful providence of God: the deliverance of the men of Jericho, the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites, and the Jebusites into their hands, and how many others were driven by God out of their lands, and how the Israelites were able to simply walk in and take over existing homes, farms, and vineyards. What was Joshua’s point? That God was not only ABLE to do such, but that He HAD done it. What had the idols of Egypt done for the Israelites?

Joshua tells the Israelites to fear the Lord, but why? Because He actually IS powerful, but the idols are not. He also tells them to serve God in sincerity and in truth. In this phrase we find the depth of Joshua’s message; he is telling the Israelites to make a conscious decision and to commit to it. Serving God in sincerity means that they were to give themselves over entirely to God and truly mean their service to Him. Serving God in truth meant that they were to do His will and only His will. Both of these commitments meant that the Israelites HAD to put away the idols that they had “served” in the land of Egypt. They could not serve both the idols and the one true God. Thus, Joshua’s statement about his personal commitment to God has even deeper meaning.

However, the passage does not end there and neither should our examination of it. Upon hearing Joshua’s very moving words, the Israelites acknowledge the providence of God and tell Joshua that they too would serve the Lord for He is their God. Joshua does something rather unexpected though...he tells them that they cannot serve God because God is holy. In other words, he justifiably insinuates that the Israelites would renege on their commitment to serve God. Why would Joshua take this approach?

After Joshua’s initial refusal, the Israelites become more adamant that they will be faithful, and so Joshua explains to them that they were essentially making a vow to serve the Lord and tells them that they were “witnesses against” themselves concerning this decision. He further explains that this commitment meant that they were to put away from among them the foreign gods and idols, then “incline” their “heart to the Lord God of Israel” (24:23). To this the Israelites reply, “The Lord our God we will serve, and His voice we will obey!” Joshua pushed the Israelites to do more than just say that they would serve God. He pushed them to understand

what this commitment meant, he turned it into a covenant, and set up reminders of this covenant. Additionally, Joshua explained the consequences of going back on this commitment by telling them that God would “harm and consume” them (24:20).

Christians today should learn a lot from this passage; we need to serve God in sincerity and truth. This means that we are honestly serving Him and not simply wearing the name of Christian so that we can feel good about ourselves. It means that we are doing so in truth; His will, His way. This means that we are obeying God no matter what He commands us to do. Joshua told Israel to make a choice and to stick to it: if you are serving God, then SERVE GOD. If you are not serving God, then stop pretending to do so!

Often, Christians think that they can somehow “ride the fence” in order to make everyone happy, but is God pleased with such? Consider Revelation 3:15-17:

*I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold or hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’ – and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.*

Jesus says that those that “ride the fence” believe that they are doing the right thing and that they are righteous, but do not realize that they are “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.” Riding the fence does nothing to further the cause of Christ, nor will it save us in the day of Judgment. In fact, the verbiage that Jesus uses expresses a severe repulsion of those who would ride the fence...He says that He would vomit such from His mouth!

Christians today need to make the conscious decision to commit themselves fully to God in sincerity and truth. They need to make the choice to put away the world as Israel was to put away the idols. Don’t try to serve both because it cannot be done.

“...as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

## **Study Opportunities**

Sunday Bible Study: 10:00 AM  
Sunday Worship Assembly: 11:00 AM

## **Meeting At**

Homewood Suites of Bozeman  
1023 E Baxter Lane  
Bozeman, MT 59715

### ***For more information:***

***Phone:*** 304-690-0269

***email:*** [contact@gallatinvalleycoc.com](mailto:contact@gallatinvalleycoc.com)

***web:*** <http://www.gallatinvalleycoc.com>

***Everyone Welcome!***

# ***Daily Bible Reading***

## ***November 2015***

November 2    1 Samuel 22-25  
November 3    1 Samuel 26-31  
November 4    2 Samuel 1-3  
November 5    2 Samuel 4-9  
November 6    2 Samuel 10-13  
November 9    2 Samuel 14-17  
November 10   2 Samuel 18-20  
November 11   2 Samuel 21-24  
November 12   1 Kings 1-3  
November 13   1 Kings 4-7  
November 16   1 Kings 8-10

November 17   1 Kings 11-13  
November 18   1 Kings 14-17  
November 19   1 Kings 18-21  
November 20   1 Kings 22, 2 Kings 1-3  
November 23   2 Kings 4-7  
November 24   2 Kings 8-10  
November 25   2 Kings 11-15  
November 26   2 Kings 16-19  
November 27   2 Kings 20-23  
November 30   2 Kings 24-25,  
                      1 Chronicles 1

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