



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

1 TIMOTHY 1:12-16

MARCH 2016

A Converted Terrorist

The kingdom of God exploded in the first century A.D. owing in large part to God's work through a converted terrorist. It should encourage us that people and circumstances don't have to be good in order for the kingdom to progress. God's purpose is being accomplished because his grace triumphs over evil. Paul's own understanding of his conversion is revealed in his testimony to Timothy.

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service; even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. And yet I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. And yet for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.

1 Timothy 1:12-16 (NASB)

Paul concluded that if the mercy of Christ could reach him, there would be no one beyond its reach. The message that burned in his heart was transformational. It specialized in turning darkness to light. Those who lose hope just because circumstances are dire and people are wicked must have forgotten the nature of God's grace.

Paul's previous life was built on the foundation of three pillars. First, he was sure his natural bloodline gave him leverage with God. Abraham's descendants were heirs to the promises of God. Being a Jew was not only important, but also essential if one wanted to be a part of God's people. The way to God was through Jewish doors. Paul was Jewish and proud of it. Second, he was absolutely sure that God's highest and final revelation was the Law as given to Moses for the people. The Torah gave meaning and direction for all who hoped to be blessed by God. Righ-

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teousness came only by keeping the Law in detail. He was extremely intentional about that. Third, the temple in Jerusalem was the most holy and important place on earth. It was a symbol of God's presence and favor on his people. It was revered, protected, and trusted. He was sure God himself protected it.

Once the living Lord encountered him, his story changed. The confrontation was so radical that he spent three years in the Arabian wilderness getting his own story

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straight in light of the new perspective of the gospel. This new story burned in his heart. He told it everywhere he went. It was the penetrating light that changed night to day for all cultures. We are extremely blessed because he meticulously wrote out his message when he wanted the church in Rome to understand why he wanted to come there. He explained why it was necessary for the whole world to hear what he had come to believe, and then carefully laid out the message that is the power of God producing salvation to Jews and Gentiles. A careful reading of the first seventeen verses of Romans chapter 1 reveals the summary of the message and its objective.

First, he identifies it as the "gospel of God." He has no doubts that what he is about to describe is the word of God. As surely as God had spoken to Moses in the Law, God had spoken more fully and finally in Jesus.

Second, he declares that the appearance

of Jesus on earth was the fulfillment of all previous promises that had given hope to Israel for hundreds of years. This was not a separate event from what had gone on before. It was not a new religion that had been created by a new leader. This was the continuation of God's grand narrative as recounted in Holy Scripture. Jesus is the climax of the story as well as the subject of the narrative, though hidden in types, shadows, predictions, and patterns. The gospel he carried was not in competition with the revelation previously given to Moses, the prophets, David, and Solomon. It is the completion.

Jewishness has been fulfilled in Jesus who is the ultimate Israel. He came as Israel's representative because Israel failed to be faithful to their covenant with God. He took the curses of their broken covenant and fulfilled their calling by his own faithfulness. The people of God are defined by the same kind of faith of Abraham, not the physical bloodline.

The Law was preparatory to saving faith. It could show the way, but it couldn't get you there. It was a great gift from God that accurately described how covenant people could live with God, but now that the Spirit had been given, people were not only guided internally but also empowered to live with God in enjoyable partnership.

The temple was a symbol of God's desire to live with his people. Jesus had not only touched the earth. He became a man to fully identify with us. He died as a man for mankind's sin. After his resurrection and ascension, he sent the Spirit to make every believer a living stone in the final temple of God.

Third, he declares that the ultimate message is about the Son. The whole creation revolves around the Father and Son dynamic. God's first son was Adam (at cre-

ation Eve was in Adam). They were a prototype of the kind of people with whom God would partner to display his purpose on earth. After their fall into sin, he called the descendants of Abraham out of Egypt and declared Israel his son. This nation of people followed the example of Adam and Eve; they were cast out of their land (garden) as well. Then finally the eternal Son came as a representative of both Adam and Israel. He was also the son of David fulfilling God's promise that David's house would not be destroyed, but that his son would sit on the throne forever.

Fourth, he declares that the resurrection displayed the power of God that would secure the transformation of all who believed. It grants victory over the fear of death. It fulfills the promise of the restoration of David's house. It is more than the hope of restoration hoped for by the Israelites. Jesus, who came as a humble baby in a manger, is now the Messiah of Israel's hope, and the Lord of all creation.

Paul's objective in taking this message to the whole world is expressed in the phrase *the obedience of faith*. He mentions it here in the beginning of his letter, and he concludes the letter with it in 16:26. This is what clearly distinguished Paul's gospel from the imposters. Ever since Adam and Eve were placed outside the Garden of Eden, humans have been trying to qualify to return. Adam and Eve's sin was *disobedience*. It would take an innocent human to accomplish an obedience to nullify the consequences of their sin. Just trying harder to be obedient would never suffice. The human heart was defiled. Not only had their action warranted the consequences of death (separation from life), but it had also infected the human race with a blindness so severe and a bondage so secure that God himself had to act in

our behalf. He did. He sent his eternal Son to be an innocent and righteous mediator for helpless and hopeless mankind. The only obedience that is relevant now is trusting Jesus as the adequate representative before God. Our obedience is at best partial. We can never be sure that the motives of the heart are pure. We are consumed with our own survival and significance. Even in our best acts of goodness, we relish our own rewards.

This message was misunderstood by many of Paul's listeners. It still is today. We don't want to give up the idea that there is something we can do that will gain favor with God. We tend to think that Isaiah was speaking about another race when he said "all our righteousness is as filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). Many pretending to be jealous for holy living insist that we need the pressure of obeying the Law lest we become ungodly. It is clear that Paul was not trying to make a religious people who were concerned about keeping the rules, but a righteous people whose delight in the Lord was so great that they would gladly live and die for his glory.

God is not keeping score of our legal obedience.

The coming kingdom had come, and Paul embraced it. All the hopes of his ancestors were fulfilled in Jesus. It didn't look like what they had pictured. But with the new eyes he gained from encountering the living Lord, Paul could clearly see that the final king had come. Everything that had happened to him would eventually happen to all who followed. He had defeated death. They would also. He was at the right hand of the Father. They were in

him and would eventually experience all that was involved in that. He had restored their fellowship and partnership with God. They were his new people on earth tasked with extending his kingdom to all aspects of creation. Redemption had come . . . was in process . . . and would be completed. His presence in the heavens at the right hand of God the Father was the guarantee.

He explained to the church in Rome the role of the Law. It was wonderful in preparing a people for faith. Like a kindergarten, it gave the basics of how life works and the necessity to align with the order of God's creation. But because it couldn't empower people who are dead in their sins to live up to its demands, it was an instrument of condemnation. But that is preparation for a Savior who takes the condemnation in exchange for his righteousness. The cycle of recommitting to the demands of the covenant had come to an end. God made a new covenant. This time it was between himself and the Son of man. Jesus stood in for us. He gets all the blessings and absorbs all the curses. Our old covenant obedience is not relevant. Someone insightfully said, "It is frustrating trying to make points with someone who is not keeping score." God is not keeping score of our legal obedience. Our mediator determined the score. We trust him and live in the freedom of a righteousness imputed.

Some objected that Paul would lead people to sin more by telling them such things. He explains that the freedom that comes from God's grace does not incite doing what my flesh wants, but rather liberates my inner being to do what I was created to do (Romans 7-8). Jesus has liberated us from the cycle of sin and death by giving us the Spirit of life. He comforts instead of condemning. He reveals the

unsearchable riches we have as joint heirs with Jesus. Those struggling with the difficulty of living righteously might gain some comfort from the story of Isaiah when he saw the fullness of God's glory in the temple. In the presence of such overwhelming glory, he was conscious of his own sinful lips. God initiates his cleansing by taking a coal from the altar and touching his lips. He is clean. God describes a difficult task and asks for volunteers. Isaiah raises his hand. It illustrates that liberated people want to partner with God in his purposes on earth. It is also true that those who raise their hands before seeing his glory and grace will find the work too difficult and easily quit, or they will complain that God doesn't reward them adequately.

Paul closes his letter describing his message with instructions about how to apply this shared life of Christ. Every instruction is an invitation to trust Jesus for the ability to get it done. It is righteousness lived out rather than obedience in order to gain favor. No human without enabling grace can love his or her enemy. Jesus has and does—through us.

The converted terrorist not only gives us hope of transformation and the ultimate success of the church, but he instructs us as to the nature of the message that, when proclaimed, changes everything.



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