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I remember a man telling me, "I'll come to church after I get my life together." I'll always remember those words. My mind has played through that conversation again and again. I should have said, "Would you wait for your broken arm to heal before calling the hospital?" I should have said, "Would you wait for the water flooding your basement to evaporate before calling the plumber?" I should have said, "Would you wait for the robber to give you your stuff back before calling the police?" You call those people to help you with the problem, not after the problem is fixed!

I wish I had explained to the man that if I had waited until my life was together before listening to God, I never would have gone to church, never would have picked up a Bible. In fact, my life still isn't all together! Every day I wake up and find myself a thoroughly corrupt sinner. Every day I wake up and find myself blind and lost. Every day I wake up and I'm still not the pastor, not the husband, not the father, not the friend, not the man that I ought to be. Some of you have probably noticed that already. I apologize to all of you for that and pray that you can forgive me.

But that is exactly why I go to the Word! That's why I listen to God, because he is the doctor who can heal my sickness. We often think of pastors or church-going folk as "good people," but that really couldn't be farther from the truth. Every leader of God's people and, frankly, every Christian is a wretched sinner in need of God's grace. If we wait until we are the perfect before coming to God, we never will. If we expect ourselves and others to be perfect, we will be horribly disappointed. Today, as we take a closer look at 1 Timothy 1:12-17, we will see that God Calls by His Mercy, Not Our Merit.

Paul's first words in these verses express his gratitude. The life of a Christian can only be one of gratitude, and Paul explains why. God had given Paul strength by appointing Paul to be an apostle. Can you imagine if God appeared to you and gave you some great task to accomplish? You might say, "Why me?" But what an honor that would be, right? That God picked you, of all people, to do this thing. For many of us, I think that would be a huge confidence booster: if the all-knowing God himself entrusted you with such an important task. It's not possible to get a higher recommendation!

Paul had experienced that. God had appeared to Paul and told him that out of all the people in the world, God wanted Paul to be one of his apostles. By calling Paul like this, God had almost told Paul flat out, "I know you're the guy to do this. I know you will be faithful." That was strength that Paul could find nowhere else. If God had

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considered Paul suited for this task, who was Paul to argue? He had the absolute highest commendation.

And that's really the case with every Christian, with you and me. You know what that word "Christian" means? "One who follows Christ," right? But did you know that "ian" ending is a diminutive ending? For example, if I talk about a kitchenette, you know it's a little kitchen. In the same way, a Christian is a little Christ. Every Christian has been called by God to be a little Christ. We are to grow to be more and more like Christ. We are to be little Christ's by pointing the world to *the* Christ, to Jesus for forgiveness, life, and salvation! What higher calling could anyone have than to be a little Christ?

God has called you of all the people in the world to be a little Christ in your work, to be a little Christ among your family and friends, to be a little Christ as you face the hardships and struggles in your life. The almighty God of the universe, who could have picked anyone, has picked you. By your baptism, by your Word-fed faith, by the Holy Spirit living in your heart, God has said to you, "I know you're the one to be a little Christ. I know you will be faithful." Wow. That's a high calling! And that is absolutely the highest commendation! That's something that gives strength. That's something to be thankful for!

Maybe at this point you are asking, "But, why me?" Paul was right there with you. Why, of all people, would God have chosen Paul? Let's look at Paul's track record. Paul himself admits, he was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man. Paul's life consisted of him regularly insulting God, throwing God's followers in prison, and seeing to it that they were put to death only because they believed in Jesus.

How would you like a pastor with that kind of past? Now, horrible as Paul's sins were, he had not acted against better knowledge. He had not committed the sin against the Holy Spirit. He *had* acted as God's enemy, which is exactly what we are outside of Christ. But in spite of Paul's sinfulness, God had mercy on Paul. Even though Paul deserved to be shoved out of God's presence forever, God not only forgave his sins, but gave him his incredible calling! Though Paul's sins piled up to the sky, God's grace, God's undeserved love for sinners like Paul abounded all the more. In spite of Paul's sin, God filled Paul with faith to believe those sins were forgiven. God filled Paul with love for his merciful God so that he might fulfill his calling.

And that's the same for all Christians. You have sins in your past too. You have sins in your present that you are struggling against right now, some you've done in ignorance, maybe some you've done even though you knew better. All of

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those sins are worthy of damnation. But bad as those sins may be, and high as that pile may be growing, God's grace has abounded to you as well. Through the Word, God is regularly filling your heart with faith to believe that his grace is greater than your sins! Through the Word, God is regularly filling you with love for your merciful God so that you might fulfill your calling to be a little Christ in your life.

Next Paul gives us a real kicker: He says, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance." This phrase is one that every single human being in the world should be able to personally say and believe. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst."

As Christians, the worst sinner can only be ourselves. I can never see another person as a worse sinner than myself, and here's why: No matter how much someone else may hurt me, they can't push faith out of my heart, only I can do that. The homosexuals, drunkards, and adulterers out there, those politicians that are destroying our country, those false prophets of false religions; they can do all kinds of damage, but they cannot take away my faith in God. Only I can do that. Only I can reject God and remove that faith from my heart. The most important concern for every Christian needs to be our own personal walk with God. Are *we* being faithful to our calling?

Notice Paul's words here. He did not say, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I *was* the worst." Paul says, "I *am* the worst." This is not the blasphemous persecutor Paul. This is Paul, God's great apostle to the gentiles who considered himself to be the worst of sinners. As little Christs, our priority and focus cannot be, "Look how bad that person over there is." It cannot be, "That person needs to be better!" I cannot be consumed with the thought that all of you need to live more holy lives! It's easy to do that, isn't it? Our sinful nature, just like our father Adam, loves to pass the blame to other people.

As Christians, we need to recognize our own sinfulness and how deep that goes! We need to constantly be asking, "Am I loving God with all my heart, soul, and strength? Am I loving my neighbor as myself? Or am I rejecting my calling to be a little Christ?" Those questions are infinitely more important than someone else's sins. What damage can someone else possibly do to me if I am already rejecting God in my own heart; if I am already sending myself to hell?

God may use someone else's sins to bring them to faith. I have heard story after story of alcoholics who hit rock-bottom and then became believers in Christ. God used their sin to bring them good. But if I am refusing to love God with all my heart, soul, and strength, if I am refusing to love my neighbor as myself, how can I call myself a Christian, even if my life looks so much better than that alcoholic at

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rock-bottom? We need to recognize the real problem in the world is not all those people that have wronged us. It's not all those people who aren't doing what they should be. The real problem is me, is each of us personally. I am the worst of sinners, not the people out there. I am.

But this is the whole reason Jesus Christ came into the world: to save the worst of sinners, like you and me. We were not called to be Christians, to be little Christs, because of our merit. We were not called because we earned it by being good enough. We were called to be Christians only because of God's pure mercy.

This is how God loves to work. God called Paul out of mercy, so as to be an example to us. Did Paul the persecutor deserve to be an apostle? Absolutely not! But God chose Paul specifically to be an example for us of his mercy. God Calls because of His Mercy, Not Our Merit.

God has called each of us to be little Christs only because he is merciful to us. No one here deserves to be a Christian. No one here deserves to go to heaven. But God has been merciful to each and every one of us.

Christ's mercy calls us. What better example can we have for what it means to be a little Christ? This is how we be the little Christs that God has called us to be: we show mercy just as God has shown us mercy. We fulfill our calling by showing mercy to those around us. We do not need to give people what they deserve. People already get that everywhere. Instead, as little Christs, we can show people mercy just as God has shown us mercy. We can show people love that they don't deserve because God has shown us love that we do not deserve.

When we treat people based on mercy, rather than based on their merit, then we are truly living up to our calling. Then we are truly loving God with all our heart, soul, and strength. Then we are truly loving our neighbors as ourselves.

So join me. Join me in following Christ who came to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. Join me in fulfilling our calling to be little Christs in our lives, by treating people with unconditional love rather than by what they deserve. Join me in worshipping our God who Calls us by His Mercy, and Not Our Merit. Amen.