

**WHEN YOU TRY TO LET GO OF YOUR PAST, BUT YOUR PAST WON'T LET GO OF YOU**

The subject continues to be *spiritual weariness* - where do you begin to look when you know things are not going well spiritually. You don't have to be a Christian very long to discover that it's not all smooth sailing. But there are better answers than giving up and quitting or getting mad at God or other people in the church.

Last week we took quite a bit of time analyzing the proper foundation and starting place in the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul says that the foundation has to be right - **1 Corinthians 3:9-11** - "**For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. [10] According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. [11] For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.**"

Tonight's teaching is to give *encouragement* for those who wrestle with the past after starting their Christian walk. Christian's wrestle with the past in *two related ways*:

- i) There can arise *condemnation for past sin* - There can arise a feeling of lingering guilt that gnaws - that grinds like broken glass as the wheels of spiritual growth try to turn.
- ii) There can also arise *regrets about wasted time and misspent opportunities*. This can quickly fester. We all know that. Even while forgiven, past failures can never be taken back again. You can't undo all of the mistakes. You can't undo all of the consequences of the foolishness. That robs many people of joy in their walk with Jesus.
- 1) **CONDEMNATION FOR PAST SIN - 1 Timothy 1:15-16** - "**The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. [16] But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.**"

Most people didn't believe Paul when he told them he was a Christian. Ananias didn't even want to pray with Paul when directly commanded by God Himself to do so. When Paul walked into a prayer circle people starting leaving to go to the bathroom. Nobody trusted Paul. And nobody had any reason to - **1 Timothy 1:13** - "**....though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent....**"

- a) **As he looked at the unbelievable events of his life and conversion Paul felt there had to be some reason *why* God had shown such marvelous grace to him.** There certainly was nothing in his past to merit such mercy. There was nothing but a humble feeling of unworthiness in Paul's heart.

But as he thinks God's work through he says the reason God saved someone as visibly rebellious as he was is to give hope and assurance to millions of others who would be tempted to feel unworthy and condemned about the sins of *their* past when *they* came to Jesus.

He says he was an "*example*" - literally, "an outline sketch" - like those used by an artist before actually doing the full painting. The sketch shows what is still yet to come. The pencil sketch shows what the actual painting is going to look like.

- b) **There are also lessons in these verses about how a Christian should look at his past sin**
  - i) **First, I don't think that Christians should continue to pray about sins that have been confessed and forsaken.** I'm not saying we shouldn't remember the *lessons* of past failures. But there's a sense in which bringing that same issue over and over to the Lord **only serves to focus your mind and attention on it rather than on the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God the Son.**
  - ii) **So how should a Christian look at his past sin? Should he try to just block it out of his mind? Not think about it?** I don't think that's the answer. Paul thought and talked about the sins of his past. He wrote about them in the Scriptures. There is nothing but good in remembering our inclination toward sin and our weakness without the inward work of the Spirit of Christ.

The issue is *how* Paul looked at his past sins that's the important point - **1 Timothy 1:13-14** - "**....though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, [14] and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.**"

The Christian must never look at his past sin by itself - as a stand-alone entity outside of or apart from the historic reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Devil wants past sin viewed in *isolation*. That takes the wind out of our sails. The Christian looks at past sins against the glory of the cross.

- iii) There's one more lesson to consider from these verses. They draw out the important question, **why** does God save bad people, anyway? "Well, He just loves us, Pastor Don." Yes He does. But that's not the whole answer. It's not even the biggest part. There's a bigger and more important reason. God saved you while you were still a sinner for the very same reason He saved Paul in his sin - for the same reason He saves anybody.

God saves bad people so that He alone will be glorified for their salvation. God does everything for His glory. Everything. All of creation **exists** solely to glorify God.

Now, nature glorifies God just by its existence. All people glorify God in the marvel of their human bodies - "fearfully and wonderfully made." But the **redeemed** glorify Him by celebrating His grace **in redemption**. We exalt Him in a way no one else can. Our motives are so much greater! Our reason for holiness and obedience are so much greater. So much has been invested in us!

I said at the beginning of this teaching there were **two** ways in which past sins can trouble the Christian. The first was feeling of guilt for wicked deeds that stand in the past, that can never be redone. Now on to the second trouble:

- 2) **DEALING WITH REGRETS ABOUT MISSED OPPORTUNITIES AND WASTED YEARS - 1 Corinthians 15:8-10** - "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. [9] For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. [10] But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."

You just can't help but notice that Paul puts himself at the bottom of the list of the Apostles. All of the others saw Jesus **before** His ascension. They ate and slept and walked and ministered with Jesus right here on earth. They sat right with Him as He taught. There were so many blessings Paul never got in on.

While John would sit with his head on Jesus' breast, Paul was killing all the Christians he could get his hands on. That's why he says he was "**untimely born**." He had missed so much. He says he had seen Christ "**last of all**" (1 Corinthians 15:8). After everyone else. Later than everyone else. Missed opportunities.

Paul had spent valuable time persecuting the church. What would that be like for a man who now said that "**for me to live is Christ**"? Where could he have gone with the gospel had he not wasted so much time? If only he hadn't been so blind - so stubborn in unbelief!

So what about it? What's a Christian to think? After all, it's true - you never **can** get those years back. You never **can** undo the deeds done in "**ignorance and unbelief**". How is the Christian to deal with vain regrets? Here again, Paul has two marvelous lessons for all of us:

- a) **While what you were is an unchangeable fact, it's not the most important thing about you any longer.** There's something so tender and encouraging in these words - "**But by the grace of God, I am what I am**"(10). "What does it matter what I was? I am what I am by the grace of God."
- b) **If you did waste too much time in the past, don't waste any more time in the present** - I like Paul's reasoning - **1 Corinthians 15:10** - "**But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.**"

"What counts most is what I am by the grace of God. And because of God's grace, I'm not wasting another minute moping. I work harder than anybody else for the Lord!" Do you see what his attitude is? It's not destructive and worrisome. It's totally productive. "If I wasted time before, now, by God's grace, I'm making up for lost ground!"