

When I used to live near the naval base in Norfolk, Virginia, on certain weekends, the public was invited to come on base and see some of their cool Navy stuff - ships and aircraft. Now, it's one thing to see an aircraft carrier on TV or in a movie, and quite something else to stand inside a hanger deck, to hear the voluminous hollow echo for yourself, **and to see for yourself** how immense and impressive, and how powerful an aircraft carrier really is. There is something about experiencing 'up closeness' for yourself that is different when we personally recognize its magnitude and power... **and I believe, our perception of sin is also something like that.** It's only after we have personally crashed - up close and personal, after we have failed, caused harm, staggered and fallen, that we appreciate the devastating impact of human sin, and that we can truly empathize with those who struggle with sin & its remnants in their life. Just as we may not appreciate how large, imposing and powerful an aircraft carrier really is until we stand next to one, **so too, it's when our sin looms large confronting us,** that we can truly recognize and appreciate its magnitude, destructive perversity and power... **and it's only when we do accept that we are sinners, that we begin to grasp and more fully appreciate the depth and breadth of God's great love for us.** It's when we know that we truly deserve God's wrath and judgment, and have instead, received God's love, compassion and mercy, **that God's grace is real, is personally significant and is way more than just a word we say in church.** The vast majority of issues I encounter in pastoral counseling are almost always destructive leftovers & secrets from the past, tied to overwhelming feelings of fear, shame, guilt and regret. Fear, shame, guilt and regret are really remarkably powerful, destructive and difficultand at times we may wonder as we struggle with issues from our past, **if there really is any escape or peace to be had and if real change and growth are actually possible.**

We may wonder, can people ever really change in significant ways? Does God's gracious love, the presence of the Holy Spirit within, **does** regular prayer, Bible, worship, fellowship and service really make any difference, is transformation even possible? Fairly early in my ministry, and as I was developing into a pastor, sometimes during my quiet prayer, study and meditation, I began to have disturbing flashbacks of past sin & failures. Sometimes just as I was caught up in a time of peaceful reflection, suddenly with a startlingly and vivid clarity of vision, some memory of an event, or something I'd said or done would intrude, come crashing into my conscienceless, **almost like I was re-living it, forcing me to revisit that moment.** These would be from my distant past, often long buried & forgotten, but somehow triggered; I'd revisit & re-experience that event. Yes, I knew that God's grace had cleansed all my sin for all time, but still, I needed to revisit some of my history with the Lord. Generally these memories were not of my better more godly moments, but rather, they were disturbing and upsetting things, poor decisions, my failures and mistakes that included hurt and harm I'd inflicted on others over the years. Spiritually I was feeling hounded by my sinful flaws of the past, and feeling deep regret as I longed to go back somehow, and speak some sense, some reason and better wisdom to that younger, more foolish me that I had once been. And as I would think and pray through each of these experiences I realized how much they were still affecting my life and living. Of course I couldn't go back to fix my failures & mistakes, **and yet I also couldn't seem to really move past them.** I was troubled and mystified by these memories and flashbacks that kept intruding and forcing their way into my quiet times... and I couldn't imagine why this kept happening to me, **for I certainly wasn't trying to remember my past sins.** But there I was sort of wallowing in this shame, guilt and regret, and I began to wonder: "What in the world was God doing calling one such as me, with my past, my mistakes, my failings, and my flaws, to serve in a position of pastoral leadership?"

But then something remarkable and totally unexpected happened. **But then** like a flash something truly incredible happened. **But then** an overflow of wonderful grace and hope happened. I suddenly realized that **if I was once again** presented with that situation, **if I once again** faced that circumstance of my past, **that if given a chance** to go back and replay – to redo my past, that I would not do or say that same mistake, I would not repeat... .. **for I was no longer the person who would do or say what I once did, that I would not make that same sinful and wrong choice again.** Something had changed. I had changed, I had grown, for I am no longer that same person I once was, not anymore. **By this, I understood in a whole new and wonderful way the incredible life-transforming power of God's grace --- the impact of God's cleansing mercy to reorient a human life... .. an incredible truth upon which to build a**

meaningful life. And at that moment I was overwhelmed by God's grace, **and grateful**, for no doubt, God really had been quietly working in my life, and guiding me to repent, and helping me get past my past. The guilt and regret over the sins of my past and personal history **became gratitude**: for by God's grace, I had been set free. **Just knowing that I would not do those things as I once had done, because I was no longer that same person anymore, was such a release from the burden of my shame and regret. Do you recognize what a fundamental and amazing life-shift that is?** God had accomplished some genuine transformation, even in me, and not just in my outward behavior and appearances, but even to the very depths of the workings of my heart. **By God's redeeming grace, something was different within.**

Though not deserving or worthy I'd moved from shame, guilt & regret to the amazing experience of grace and gratitude, and thereby rendered useful in the service of the Lord. By the mercy and compassion that God has for sinners, through the Presence and blessing of the Holy Spirit, I was being scrubbed clean, inside and out, and the Lord had entrusted to me, a ministry to accomplish... which is exactly what Jesus promises to do in all our lives **if we will** submit to his work in us through the Holy Spirit **if we will** just allow God to have his way with our lives. That is a part of the truth Paul is describing in 1st Timothy, as he considers the story of his own journey of faith, where he had been at the beginning so many years ago, and where he was now after years of faithful ministry. This passage reads as a proclamation of joy and gratitude, and utter amazement at the gracious accomplishment of God... transforming, changing Paul's life so completely from within. He is grateful, and amazed that God would have called and used him, for he had fought violently in opposition to God's will. He was the one who held the cloaks of the men, of the mob, so that they could more easily throw stones at Stephen, who according to Acts, was the first Christian martyr. As Saul he had committed himself entirely and fully to seeking out and destroying followers of Jesus Christ **and yet God's mercy and grace had overflowed upon even him, and even after all this time and experience of walking with God, Paul is still amazed by God's overwhelming mercy and grace.**

vs. 13, 15-16

... even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence... The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example ...

Having been saved as Saul, and as Paul permitted to serve & preach, so God's mercy was demonstrated and proven and proclaimed **as a vivid demonstration for God awesome pardoning grace.** In the 1st Timothy text, Paul makes no effort to deny or to minimize the harm that he did against God, but refers to himself: "formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence" So too, it is important that we recognize our sinful past, to see our sin in its full depth of destructive depravity. Even though our sin may not be spectacular or make the evening news, neither is it, a little tiny sin, or just a minor or mere faux pas. However slight I may want to judge my sin, and however much I may want to compare my sins to others, more dastardly than mine, **I know that my sin alone, was sinful enough, as to require that Jesus suffer and die on my behalf. My sin was no less a sin and an offense against God, than the sin of the most evil and corrupt person who ever lived.** But as it turns out, what a friend we have in our failure and flaws, for it is through the stark truth about our sinful selves that we learn the truth of God's mercy and precious love.

By the power, compassion and pardon of God, we are then moved beyond our shame, guilt and regret to live more productive Christian lives of grace and gratitude. Paul presents himself as a foremost sinner and example of God's power and grace to transform and make new. It's this amazing work of God, his total life reorientation that provides Paul with his credentials to preach & lead... ..for far more than any good or worthy that Paul might have done, **his redemption** best demonstrates God's love and God's grace. **This contrast, that God should call someone so flawed and fallen, to completely transform, and so use for God's glory and purpose, most clearly demonstrates that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace, that no sin is too large, too hidden, or buried too deeply for God's love and mercy to reach in, and to heal.** Paul offers himself as an example of God's infinite grace, who clearly shows that no one is beyond the scope of God's love. **While our sin is overwhelming, God's**

compassion is far greater, which leads us to more than ever appreciate the magnitude of God's loving mercy, God's power, patience and grace. By no means are we to dwell or ruminate on our sins and failings, **for that's not the gospel and Good News about Jesus Christ**. And it would be a perversion to so concentrate on our sin, that we fail to highlight and delight in God's love. **But there is a reason to confront, remember and reflect on our past. It's not to dwell on as some unhealthy shame or self-contempt, but as a handle from which to grasp God's love and grace...** for an honest assessment of our sin and **God's grace** accomplishes at least these 5 basic advantages to our walk of faith: 1- it protects us from a false and self-righteous pride 2- it refreshes our gratitude, our appreciation of God's love 3- it challenges us to respond, to live our lives more faithfully 4- it helps us be more merciful and gentle to others who fail 5- it enables us to encourage others and offer them true hope As Paul wrote,

vs. 14-16

the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.