

THE RICHES OF GOD'S MERCY (1 Timothy 1:12-14)

As Paul remembers the “glorious gospel” entrusted to him, he must express the ongoing thanksgiving that lives in his heart: “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord,” (1 Tim. 1:12a). He is expressing thankfulness to the one through whom the richness of God’s mercy revealed itself in a visible, compelling manner. The Lord Jesus had given Paul all the strength and ability that became so evident in his ministry. With Paul every Christian, whether pastor, teacher, or lay-person, will acknowledge the Lord Jesus and say, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13). Our competence for the ministry comes from Him who is the true God (2 Corinthians 3:4-6).

What causes Paul’s thankfulness toward Christ Jesus is “that he considered me to be trustworthy, and has appointed me into the ministry,” (1 Tim. 1:12b). By entrusting him with the gospel, God had considered Paul as someone who would faithfully carry out such a trust. Yet that was not Paul’s doing. He recognised himself as “one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 7:25). In the next verse Paul will say why this amazes him.

First, he again speaks of this entrusting on the part of God that involved “appointing me into the ministry.” Ministry in Christ’s church, comes by appointment, that is, through a call that the Lord Himself extends. On the way to Damascus, the Lord said to Saul, the persecutor, “I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of Me and what I will show you” (Acts 26:16). Today also, whoever serves in the public ministry has been given a trust from the Lord, called by Him through the church into His service. Let God’s servants not fail to be amazed at this trust and to be inspired to thanks and faithfulness .

“Although I used to be a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man” - no wonder Paul continued to be totally amazed at having been chosen by the Lord for His service. Paul had spoken evil of the Lord Jesus, slandered and railed against Him. In persecuting Christians Paul had persecuted Christ. “Why do you persecute Me?” the Lord had asked. We shall let Paul himself describe that time of infamy in his life: “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them” (Acts 26:9-11). Paul had conducted all-out war against Christianity, against Christ. Paul was a man of conviction and zeal also when he acted as a blasphemer.

“However, I have received mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief.” Paul had not acted against better knowledge. He was convinced of what he was doing. He had followed his conscience, misguided though it was, through ignorant unbelief. That did not excuse what he had done. That did not make his actions any less wicked or his words any less blasphemous, but the Lord showed mercy on him in his ignorance and gave him enlightenment. The Lord broke through his unbelief and worked faith in his heart.

Paul cannot help marvelling at the full measure of God’s grace: “The grace of our Lord has also been exceedingly abundant.” Paul’s needs were great, but God’s grace, the undeserved love that moved Him to reach out to Paul, was even greater, more than enough. The well of God’s grace does not run dry. A whole world of sinners does not exhaust it. God “wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). What a shame if we on our part place a limit on that boundless grace by our lack of mission zeal!

God’s grace came “along with faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” Faith and love accompany God’s grace. By grace Paul was brought to faith in the Lord Jesus, and that resulted in love for God

and for his neighbour. Even before his Damascus experience, Paul had a kind of “faith in God” and thought he was acting out of love for God. Often people are deceived by what they think is faith and love. They consider some kind of general belief in God, even apart from Christ, as faith. The love that motivates them is not a love for God but the desire to feel good about themselves.

By God’s grace Paul was brought to the true faith that centres in Christ. Such a faith bears the fruit of love, a love that is inspired by the love of God in Christ and wants to follow in the footsteps of its loving Saviour