

The Biggest Sinner I Know

Mark 7:20-23; 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Who is the worst sinner you know? I'm talking about the biggest, baddest, most evil person you've ever known. We can look to history and name some pretty big sinners—Hitler, Mussolini, Saddam Hussein. We can look to current events and add the names of those who have gone into movie theaters and shopping malls and elementary schools and cold-heartedly killed innocent people. There are other big names in our world that everyone has heard of and we would all agree that they might qualify as being pretty big sinners. There are men or women whose lifestyles proclaim pretty loudly that they thumb their noses at God and fill their days in the pursuit of pleasure. They have committed murder with no respect for human life. They have robbed and stolen. They have committed adultery. They have lived lives filled with the worst forms of evil.

In fact, there's a portion of the first chapter of Romans which describes some pretty big sinners: *"They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them"* (Romans 1:29-32). And there are some pretty well-known celebrities who by their own admission fall into some of those categories.

But I'm not talking about celebrities. I'm not talking about people whose names are in the news. Who is the biggest, baddest sinner *you* know?

Today I'm going to tell you the name of the biggest sinner *I* know. I'm actually going to name names. The time has come for this to happen, and I've prayed over it and prayed over it. I feel that this is something I must do.

Who is it?

Today I'm going to give you this person's name. I've known him quite a while, and I know some things about him no one else knows. In fact, I spoke with him just this week, and I realized in a fresh way just what a big sinner he really is. As I've grown closer to him over the years, I've seen how rotten his heart is. I've heard him lie. I know about his apathy, his lack of compassion, his anger and his

temptations. Over time, he's revealed himself to be impatient, hard-hearted and cold toward the Spirit of God. More than once has he rushed ahead of God, thinking he knew better than God did about what was best. He can be proud and arrogant. And he really is the biggest sinner I know.

Paul considered himself the chief sinner, the worst sinner. He had been arrested, mistreated, stoned, whipped, beaten and even left for dead—yet he did not point fingers at those people who did those things to him and say, “**They** are the worst sinners I know.” What loomed the largest in Paul's mind was not what *others* had done to *him*—but the sins **Paul** had committed against **God**.

As he described himself in 1 Timothy 1 we see that his sin had three dimensions: First, he blasphemed against God and second, he persecuted others. But the third dimension had to do with the condition of his heart. He said that he was “*a violent man*.” To our minds, the word “violent” presents one image, but look closer. The word Paul used describes someone who inflicts pain on others for the sheer joy of inflicting it! He had Christians hauled away to prison and even executed, not because they deserved it, not because there was no other choice, but because it was fun! So Paul described himself one other way: he was the worst of sinners, and he used a word there that means “first” or “chief.”

I remember the very first time I read 1 Timothy 1:15. I had not been a Christian for very long, and was in a youth Bible study, when the group was asked to turn to this verse. One of the other youth was asked to read this verse out loud: “*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.*” As soon as those words met the air, someone else spoke up and said, “Oh, no, he's not!” He meant, “Paul is not the worst sinner—I am!”

And I remember looking down at that verse, and thinking, “Oh, no, *you're* not—***I am!***”

I am the worst sinner I know. Sharon and I were talking about this particular sermon, and I said to her, “The worst sinner I know is me.” And she said, “Oh, I knew that already!”

I know the sins I've committed, or at least most of them. I know how dark and evil my heart is. I know the things in my past which have grieved the heart of God. I am aware of the failures of my life. When Jesus said in Mark 7...

For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean...(Mark 7:21-23)

...He was talking about me, my heart. (Idea suggested by Andy Smith at joyfulslavery.blogspot.com)

I am the worst sinner I know. But I am not the worst sinner **you** know. Who would **that** be? Think about that. There are people in your life whose names immediately pop into your head. Others have treated you with disrespect, they've lied about you, broken promises to you, betrayed you and hurt you in shameful ways. But are they the worst sinners you know?

We today need to look at the situation with clear eyes. We tend to hold grudges if someone even looks at us wrong, or even has a different opinion. And we see ourselves as superior to others because, after all, we've been offended! The principle of Scripture is that we not look at what others have done to us, but what we have done to God. We've made a major step upward in our Christian growth when we see our own sin toward God as bigger or of more consequence than the sins others have committed toward us.

Romans 7:18-20 tells us, *"For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it."* The *New Living Translation* of Romans 8:7 reads, *"For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will."*

Dave Harvey once wrote a book entitled, *When Sinners Say "I Do."* He wrote: "I've seen my own heart is darker and more awful; it's more proud, selfish and self-exalting; and it's more consistently and regularly in rebellion against God than anything I have glimpsed in the heart of anyone else. As far as I can see, the biggest sinner I know is me."

So. I am the biggest sinner I know. You are the biggest sinner you know. But there is hope. Because even though I am the biggest sinner I know, I also know Jesus, Who is the Greatest Savior. So understanding who is the biggest sinner we know, we also need to know that He has provided for our sins to be paid for. The Bible calls that "atonement."

We have to be honest about what sin is and what it has done to our hearts. It is easy to say things like this, but do we really believe it? Suppose we were sitting in the same room with a child molester, or someone who killed an entire family while driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Would we still believe that we are bigger sinners than that person is?

I've personally known quite a few pretty bad sinners in my lifetime. And as I think about those people and look at their lives, it is very easy to compare myself to them. When I do that, I think that perhaps I am not all that bad after all.

We humans tend to look at sin horizontally; that is, we look at the sins of other people and compare ourselves to them. And because we haven't committed this sin or that one, we convince ourselves that we must be pretty good people after all. But Scripture teaches us that the only standard for determining how bad a particular sin might be is what God says about it. We should be concerned about *our* sin, and not someone else's. Other people and their sins are not my biggest problem: I am.

Scripture teaches us that God doesn't rank sin the way we do by saying that murder is worse than hatred, or that adultery is worse than lust, or that actual thievery is worse than coveting. When the Bible says that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, it doesn't rank us according to the different types of sin we may have committed. When the Bible tells us that sin separates us from God so that He does not hear us, we're not told that this sin is worse than that one. When we read in the Bible that sin in all its forms is repugnant to God, we do not see a ranking that tells me that your sin is worse than mine, or mine worse than yours.

If I am the biggest sinner I know, and if you are the biggest sinner you know, there are two startling conclusions that jump out at us:

1 We can't fix this on our own.

I can cover it up, but I can't get rid of it. It is always lurking just under the surface. My bad temper, my evil heart, my tendency to think impure thoughts—I can't rid myself of those things. I can't be good enough to change my heart. I can't give enough money or go to church enough Sundays or even preach enough sermons. I have to agree with Scripture when it says in Jeremiah 17:9 that *"the heart is desperately wicked and beyond cure."* Titus 3:4-5 tells us *"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy...."*

D. L. Moody was a famous preacher of another generation. Once he was talking about the thief on the cross who believed in Jesus just before he died: “The thief had nails through both hands, so that he could not work; and a nail through each foot, so that he could not run errands for the Lord; he could not lift a hand or a foot toward his salvation, and yet Christ offered him the gift of God; and he took it. Christ threw him a passport, and took him into Paradise. “

You and I are the same. There is nothing we can do to remedy the situation of the sin we find ourselves in. I am the biggest sinner I know; you are the biggest sinner you know—and none of us can do a thing about it. When we truly understand how God sees our sin, when we understand the depth of our sin, we see without question that we can’t fix this on our own.

2 We stand amazed at the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we fully understand the gravity of our sin, when we finally come to grips with how horrible our sin is and how repugnant it is before God, and when we finally realize that we can have complete and utter forgiveness—the only reaction is to be absolutely amazed. That was what Charles Gabriel discovered, and he wrote a hymn to describe it:

*I stand amazed in the presence Of Jesus the Nazarene,
And wonder how He could love me, A sinner, condemned, unclean.
How marvelous! How wonderful! And my song shall ever be;
How marvelous! How wonderful! Is my Savior’s love for me!*

Elizabeth Clephane had a similar experience. In her hymn *Beneath the Cross of Jesus*, she wrote: “Two wonders I confess—the wonders of His glorious love, And my unworthiness.”

In one of her books Elisabeth Elliot has written that one day she heard her young daughter singing to her kitten, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like you.” Is that the way we look at it? I don’t really see how dark and sinful my own heart is, so it’s a lot easier to see your sin and believe that you are the one who needs the amazing grace we sing about. But every one of us needs to realize that the truth is that this amazing grace saved a wretch like *me!*

When the great Puritan preacher, Thomas Hooker, was on his deathbed, a friend tried to comfort him by saying, “Brother Hooker, you are going to receive your

reward.” “No, no!” he managed to breathe. “I go to receive mercy!” So it is with us. Because of what Jesus did for us on the Cross, God in His mercy has withheld the judgment that we deserve. Instead, He has shown us mercy.

But that’s just where it starts. God pours out His grace on us. Look at verse 14, where Paul says, “*The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly.*” Paul used a word here that means “superabundant,” but then that didn’t seem strong enough. So he added a prefix to that word that means “above,” “over,” or “more.” So Paul was literally saying that God’s grace was “poured out on me super-super-abundantly.” There are literally no words which are adequate to describe what He has done for us.

Because of His mercy, God didn’t give Paul what he deserved. Because of His grace God gave Paul what he *didn’t* deserve. And it is the same with us. This salvation we have, this relationship with God that we have—it was given to us as a gift, one we didn’t deserve and could never earn.

There is a story about a man who died and went to heaven, where he met Peter at the Pearly Gates. Before he could enter Peter gave him a few questions to answer, telling him that he had to accumulate 100 points before he can go in.

“So, how often did you go to church?” Peter asked. “I went every Sunday and Wednesday,” replied the man.

“That’s one point,” answered Peter. “One point? Wow! I figured it would be worth more than that.”

“And did you give any offerings?” asked Peter. “Yes, I gave 10% of all my income every week,” answered the man.

“Well, let’s see,” answered Peter, “that’s worth 3 points. Did you do anything else?” “Well, right off hand, I can’t think of a whole lot. I did mostly what I thought I was supposed to do.”

“Well, we’ll give you 5 points for good behavior, but can’t you come up with something else?” By this time, the man was completely flustered. He finally cried, “Well, I can’t come up with anything else. It seems no one can enter heaven except by the Grace of God!”

“100 points!” Peter said. “Come on in!”

I am like that man. And so are you. Isaiah 64:6 tells us, “*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags....*” Our best behavior is simply not good enough. So while I am the biggest sinner I know, and you are the biggest sinner you know, the good news is that we can all experience the wonderful, matchless, amazing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.