

I Am What I Am – 1 Cor 15:9-10

Introduction – Do you ever regret how long it took for you to really get serious about following Christ? Do you ever bemoan how little you've changed in the last year or years? Do you ever feel like giving up on ever hoping you (or maybe someone else close to you) will ever change? Is the grace of God not enough?

The Passage (1 Cor 15:9-10) – Paul has been giving account of Christ's resurrection appearances (vv1-8) and his immediate context is the doctrine of the resurrection (Chapter 15). But in the midst of this grand teaching, Paul describes how he views himself and his work, and through that we also may learn how we are to view ourselves and our lives, both looking back, considering where we are now, and looking ahead.

What Was Paul? – In verse 8, Paul uses a very self-deprecating word, translated “*one born out of due time*” to describe himself. He says he was “*the least*” of the apostles and that he is not “*worthy to be called an apostle*.” Paul was a persecutor of the church, but let's make it more personal, as Paul did. He dragged off men and women to prison for their profession of faith (Acts 8:3). He became a bounty-hunter of sorts (Acts 9:1-2) leading even to the death of believers (Acts 22:4-5). His goal was the destruction of the church (Gal 1:13). Paul would not be our first choice to, for instance, author (along with his colleague Luke) the majority of the New Testament.

What Did Paul Become? (1 Cor 15:9-10, 1 Tim 1:12-17) – Jesus met Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) and everything changed. Paul could have spent the rest of his life sitting in a corner bemoaning his previous actions. He had ruined the lives of people he now knew were his brothers and sisters. He had blasphemed the name of His Savior. But Paul doesn't spend much time looking into himself or his past except to turn his attention to the amazing grace and mercy of his Lord. That kind of faith in the grace and power of the Lord Jesus Christ led Paul into a new life with tremendous zeal. And so, though last of all the apostles, yet, in a sense, he became the first. Paul could say, “*by the grace of God, I am what I am....*” His past only proved more that all of his successful labors were not his, “*but the grace of God.*”

Spiritual Lessons to Learn – We cannot look back upon our past without wincing with regret at things we have done. And to some extent, that is as it should be. But the gospel teaches us that such regrets do not need to lead us into misery, despair or hopelessness for the future.

Truly Putting the Past Behind – Maybe you have regrets that it took so long for you to submit to and believe upon Christ. But like the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16), it is not so important *when* you came to Christ as it is *that* you have come to Christ. Learn from Paul, another late-comer, to say, “*but by the grace of God I am what I am...*” And what are you? You are forgiven, reconciled to God by the blood of His Son. You are a child of God (1 John 3:1-3) and knowing this puts you on the path to becoming more and more like Him.

Confidence From Humility – As you approach the Father with boldness, as you present before Him any of your labors, as you wrestle with any latent sin, always come with humility. Understanding grace brings this humility – ever approaching God with a sense of your own unworthiness and then ever leaving reminded of your justification in Christ (Luke 18:9-14). The one who comes with something in his hand leaves with nothing. The one who comes with nothing in his hands leaves with everything.

Applying Such Grace – First, we begin to see that to dwell upon our past failures is a waste of time and energy. It is to follow in the footsteps of the accuser, Satan, who would always point out your faults and failures. Second, bemoaning your past cripples your ability to walk now in victory and almost guarantees failure today. Third, if you really believe all you say about how much time you've wasted, then follow Paul's example. He was far behind the others and yet “*labored more abundantly than they all.*” However, there is a morbid and sinful preoccupation with self that lures many to think about themselves, even if it is only over their failures, instead of looking up to Jesus.

Pressing on in Grace – God was not finished with Paul after his conversion. God is not finished with you either. The One who can transform a murderous blasphemer can certainly handle you. “*Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*” (Phil 3:12-14).

Believing in that Grace for Others – Whether it is a loved one, a long time friend or foe, a wayward son or daughter, never conclude that the grace of God is not strong enough to save, to change, to deliver, or to transform. What kind of people would we be if we lived with grace-filled optimism for what we expected God to do in us and in those around us?

Even the Wasted Years – Finally, hear the words of Joel the prophet as he spoke of what God would do through the coming of Christ – “*So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten...*” (Joel 2:25).