

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 2
June 7, 2026
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
Much forgiveness. Much love.

—1 Timothy 1:12-17

Permit me to begin by asking you a simple question that doesn't have a simple answer: What moves you? What drives you? What motivates you? Why do you do what you do? Do you ever stop and ask yourself that question? Why do you get up in the morning? Why do you eat what you eat? Why do you wear what you wear? Why do you drive what you drive and go where you go? When we stop and think about it, we are driven and motivated by a lot of different things. Maybe you have a sense of responsibility. Maybe you don't want to disappoint people in your life. You make your bed because you like to live in a neat space. You take a shower because you don't want to smell bad. You might work hard on your homework because you want to get good grades, so you can get into a good school, so you can land a good career. You might spend extra time in front of a mirror to impress that special someone. You might pull over to the side of the road to help someone because you care about your fellow human being. You might volunteer at church because you want to help and support gospel ministry. You might lie around in your pajamas all day because you're sick and need to recover, or because you just want some down time, or because you're just lazy and unmotivated. You might work like a fiend because a problem needs to be solved, because you have the expertise to make a difference, or just because you don't know how to slow down, and you always work like a fiend. The truth is: there are many things that drive us and motivate us to do what we do. It's also true that when we're in the middle of something, often it doesn't hurt for us to stop and ask ourselves, "Why am I doing this?"

What is it with the Apostle Paul? Why did he do what he did? Here is a man who covered thousands of miles sharing the Good News of Jesus. This is a man who was shipwrecked and spent a night and a day in the open sea. He was imprisoned. He faced bandits. He was flogged. He was stoned and left for dead. He was cursed and driven out of town. But still he kept going, doing the same thing over and over again. Finally, his life ended when his head was cut off. Why? What drove the Apostle Paul to do what he did?

The answer to that question is found in one of the greatest human turnaround stories ever told. In his former life, St. Paul the Apostle was known as Saul of Tarsus. Saul of Tarsus was born a Jew, and he did everything he could to be the best, most devout, most faithful Jew he could possibly be. He studied at the feet of the best teacher. He was intensely passionate about obeying the law of Moses. And because he was so intent on upholding Judaism, he had made it his mission in life to stamp out Christianity. When Stephen, a deacon in the Church and the first Christian martyr was stoned, there was Saul of Tarsus giving his approval. When Christians were rounded up and thrown into prison for their faith, there was Saul of Tarsus coordinating the efforts and making it all happen.

But what changes when something happens to you that makes you realize that everything you thought was true was actually flat wrong? What changes when your whole religious belief system is turned upside-down? That's what happened to Saul of Tarsus—a complete 180° pivot. He thought he was going to get right with God by being a good person, by keeping the Commandments, by following the law of Moses—and God showed him that was a path to hell. He thought he was tight with God because he was a Jew, one of God's chosen people—and God showed him that being descended from Abraham's bloodline meant nothing for salvation. He thought he was so right persecuting followers of Jesus—and then he saw Jesus! In a blinding vision, a flash of light, on the road just outside Damascus, where he was going to make more trouble for the Christian Church, there he saw Jesus. And Jesus asked him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It's hard for you to keep kicking against the goads" (Acts 26:14). That was the turning point. After three days of blindness and heart-wrenching soul searching, Saul was baptized. He became known as Paul, and now he began to preach the religion he had previously tried to destroy. The account of Saul's conversion is a powerful example of the power of God to transform the most stubborn, rebellious person into a devoted follower of Jesus.

That's the turnaround Paul describes in his letter to Timothy that we're studying today. ¹² *I give thanks to the one who empowered me, namely, Christ Jesus our Lord, that he treated me as trustworthy, appointing me into his ministry.* ¹³ *He did this even though formerly I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man. But I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief.* ¹⁴ *The grace of our Lord overflowed on me along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.* All Paul had to do was reflect, to remember his former way of life and remember the transforming grace and mercy God showed him. He looked back on his sins, how wicked he had been, and he reflected on the forgiveness he had received—much forgiveness! And because he had received much forgiveness, he responded with much love.

In America we love a good rags-to-riches story, don't we? America is a land of opportunity, and we love those stories about people who came into this world under very humble circumstances, but in spite of their poverty they made it big. We might think of Andrew Carnegie, born in poverty, who became a steel magnate and one of the wealthiest men of

his time. Or Abraham Lincoln, born in a humble log cabin, who went on to become President of the United States and the one who saved the Union. There's one thing worth noting about men like these: they never forgot where they came from. They never forgot what life used to be like. Oh, they didn't wallow in their past—they had moved on—but they never forgot their past, either.

That was the Apostle Paul. He never forgot where he came from. Oh, he didn't wallow in his past—God's grace had permitted him to turn the page and move on—but he knew where he had come from. ¹⁵ *This saying is trustworthy and worthy of full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," of whom I am the worst.* ¹⁶ *But I was shown mercy for this reason: that in me, the worst sinner, Christ Jesus might demonstrate his unlimited patience as an example for those who are going to believe in him, resulting in eternal life.* The worst of sinners! The greatest recipient of God's boundless grace! That's how Paul viewed himself. In 1 Corinthians 15 he says about himself, "I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle because I persecuted God's church" (1 Cor. 15:9). Paul never forgot where he came from because (1) he had compassion for those who were still lost and perishing where he had been and (2) he didn't ever want to go back. He had received much forgiveness. Now he wanted to show much love.

The Apostle Paul is just one example in the Bible of sinners who received boundless grace from God. Think of the sinful woman who poured perfume on Jesus' feet. She had a terrible reputation in her town, but Jesus had given her something no one else could give her: forgiveness. And because she had received much forgiveness, she was compelled to give Jesus much love. Or think of Matthew, the disciple of Jesus. He had been living a very comfortable life as a tax collector, until Jesus came along one day and said, "Follow me!" With Jesus he found redemption, the forgiveness of sins, and because he had received much forgiveness, he wanted to show much love. He invited his tax collector friends to meet with Jesus and dine with the Savior, so they could know Jesus' forgiveness. Much forgiveness, much love. The Bible is not the history of a bunch of really great, noble, wonderful, upstanding people, who were paragons of virtue and role models for everyone to follow. No, the Bible is the history of a bunch of wretched sinners, unworthy and unclean, who found grace, who received forgiveness, and who responded with much love.

And that, my dear Christian friends, brings us to you and to me. Let's remember where we came from. We were once dead in our transgressions and sins. Each one of us was a slave to Satan, twisted around the Devil's little finger, bent on doing his will. Each one of us was born of sinful flesh and bound for hell. And there was nothing we could do in that situation to change our dreadful lot and change our horrible fate. Our sinful minds were hostile to God. We couldn't do God's will, and we didn't even want to. The thing that turned you around and that turned me around was grace—pure, simple, saving grace. Undeserved love. God's mercy, God's election, God's choice. In his mercy God sent his Son Jesus to wash our sins away in his blood, to nail our guilt to the cross. In his mercy God gave you and me his Holy Spirit. He opened our eyes to see Jesus as our Savior. He turned your heart to him in repentance. He forgave us all our sins. He caused us to be born again of water and the Holy Spirit. He called you, he enlightened you, he set you apart to be his very own child and an heir of eternal life. He didn't do it because we're so great or so worthy. He did it purely out of grace—pure, undeserved love.

Your sins, they're big. My sins, they're huge. Each of us can say, "I'm the worst of sinners!" But God's love is bigger. God's mercy is greater than the worst of sins. He called you out of the darkness and into his wonderful light. You have received much forgiveness. Much forgiveness! And because we have received much forgiveness, it is our high privilege and our noble calling to give much love—love for God and love to our neighbor.

So what drives us? Why do we do what we do? Why do we want to be in church and worship the Lord in his house? Because we love the fellowship of God's people, and we love the word of God. It refreshes our soul; we drink it in like dew from heaven. Why do we want to avoid immorality and keep our bodies and minds pure? Because we have been bought with a price and we want to honor God with our body. Why do we want to be careful how we use our tongues and watch what comes out of our mouths? Because we want the same tongues that praise God in his sanctuary to speak wholesome, uplifting, encouraging words when we're out in the world. Why do we want to be careful how we use our time—on things that are productive and wholesome? Because each day is a gift of God's grace, and because time is precious, and because Jesus tells us to work while it is day because the night is coming when no one can work.

We don't have to speculate about what drove the Apostle Paul. He comes right out and tells us: "Christ's love compels us. For we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him, who died and was raised to life again" (2 Corinthians 5:14). Much forgiveness. Much love.

¹⁷ *Now to the King eternal, to the immortal, invisible, only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*