
Christ Came to Save Sinners

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you had to sum up some of the most important core teachings of the Christian faith, what would you choose to summarize, and how would you phrase it? And what if you were restricted to just one short sentence in doing so? Well, near as we can tell, in the earliest years of the Christian Church, pastors, teachers, and others did precisely this as a way to capture the essence of the still new Christian faith, and they captured it in short, memorable sayings. Today on Groundwork, we begin a new series that looks at these so-called faithful sayings. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

0:00:42.1] From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, as we said a moment ago, the early Christians, we think, in the First Century apparently began to write – or compose – maybe they did not write things so much, but they composed some pithy, brief lines that summarized some key aspects of the faith, and then they would circulate those among themselves.

DAVE BAST

Right. As we were kicking around Groundwork ideas a while back, we came across this phrase from the Pastoral Epistles, that is I and II Timothy and Titus – letters that Paul wrote to pastors about... a lot of the material in them is about being a pastor and what that means; so, the Pastoral Epistles. There are these five different little creed-like statements that are introduced with the phrase: This is a faithful saying and deserves to be accepted by all.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the Pastoral Epistles were also, we believe, the last letters Paul wrote. These were his later letters; so by the time Paul got around to writing these Pastoral Epistles, there had been development in the early Church. So, we think maybe Paul's letters to the Thessalonians were his first ones, and there might be, who knows, 15 or 20 years between the two; so by the time that Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles there had been development in the early Church, and one key development was, as we said, these faithful sayings; and I think we can understand why people in the early Church developed these; because they had no written materials. They did not have Bibles. They did not have tracts, brochures; they had nothing written to consult. Anything they knew, if they wanted to share with somebody the essence of the Christian faith – if somebody at work asked them: What do you believe as Christians? They had to rely on their memories. They could not look it up. They could not pull the Bible out of their back pocket; and so, they came up with short sayings, which were easy to memorize. Therefore, you could carry them around in your head. Short little sayings that you could then share with people who wondered what this whole Christ thing and Jesus movement and Christianity, as it eventually came to be called – what was it all about? Well, here are some faithful sayings that get at it.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely. I just think it is so fascinating to try to imagine what their life and experience was like in this regard as far as how do you know what you believe? What is your authority? Nobody had a Bible because what we think of as the Bible did not exist yet. You know, the New Testament letters had been written, many of them, but they were circulating individually as letters. By the time Paul writes these words, probably the four Gospels had not yet been written...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, not written down yet.

DAVE BAST

There is the Old Testament – the Hebrew Scriptures – but people did not carry copies of that around. That was in scrolls, and if it existed anywhere it was in a synagogue. I mean, think about this: Even Paul probably did not have a written copy of the scriptures. So when he quotes – and when the other apostles quote the Old Testament – they are quoting from memory. People relied on their memory. When the Gospels came to be written down, the stories had already been circulating. They had been told and retold. People had memorized them. They memorized the words of Jesus. And so, we find these interesting little snippets of Christian creedal statements, and they run the gamut from very practical to very poetic and even spiritually profound statements.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Of course, you know for us today, if somebody said what is the Gospel? We would say, well, that is easy: John 3:16: For God so loved the world... Well, they did not have John 3:16. They did not have John. They did not have anything; and so, these statements developed, and we have no idea how many faithful sayings were circulating in the early Church, but what we do know is that, again, by the time Paul wrote Timothy and Titus, there were enough of them floating around that Paul grabbed ahold of some of these early catchphrases of the faith and he would kind of give them his apostolic stamp of approval; so, he would say: There are lots of faithful sayings floating around, but here is a good one. This is a keeper. This one nails it; and then he would quote the saying, and say: Keep repeating this one to people. You are pastors, Timothy and Titus, so keep repeating that one because that is a good one. That gets it. That is the Gospel in a nutshell.

DAVE BAST

And it is interesting, too, how they are introduced, or how they are described. We are calling them the faithful sayings, or perhaps you could translate it, trustworthy sayings that deserve to be accepted, is the other phrase that is used with them; but if you think about it, a saying maybe very common and very familiar, and yet not necessarily be trustworthy. Just think of advertising slogans, for example. I mean, I don't know; one that pops into my head: Things go better with Coke; for Coca-Cola. Well, not necessarily. The more we discover about soft drinks and what that does to us... So, what Paul is saying is not just that these are short, that these are pithy, that these are memorable, but you can rely on them; you can count on them; you can absorb them and take them; you can stake your life on them. That is what a trustworthy saying is – a faithful saying.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think the other thing we will see in this program already, but also in the other four programs, because this will be a five-part series, I think maybe we mentioned, but that these are also sort of windows in time – these are windows on history. This was the earliest Church saying. This is the core. You boil everything else away, what is at the core? And I think what we will see is that if the early Christians – and if Paul, by putting his stamp of approval on these now, too – if they knew that these things contained in the faithful sayings are core, then I guess they are kind of a good yardstick for us to measure ourselves against in the contemporary Church. Do we still have ahold of this?

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, the early Church thought: That gets it. That is the Gospel. Can we still resonate with that today? And I think that is something we will be asking throughout this series.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and a great yardstick, too; so, when Paul begins with the first saying, for example, that we are going to look at today, the saying is trustworthy and deserves to be accepted: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Not, do not use drums in your worship service. That is not a trustworthy saying. That is not at the core. The core is really the core here, and we see that beautifully in this first statement; but maybe we should say just a word to two about the background to I Timothy.

When Paul writes to Timothy, Timothy is leading the church in Ephesus – the city of Ephesus – a church that Paul probably had planted, or at least he had been there very early on in the course of his missionary journeys. Interestingly, later on, at the end of the First Century, the Apostle John would lead the church there; so Timothy had either died or moved on; but at this point in time – probably in the early 60s of the First Century – Timothy is leading the church in Ephesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is a tough city. It was a very secular city; a lot of idolatry; a lot of godlessness; and part of what Paul has wanted to do is to encourage Timothy. Timothy has a tough row to hoe in Ephesus, and so he is going to give Timothy some core things that he needs to keep repeating over and over; and the first one we are going to look at is really an encouragement to Timothy; and ultimately, we will see it is still an encouragement today. We will look at that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, let's get right to the passage from I Timothy; Paul is writing here:

^{1:12}I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that He considered me trustworthy, appointing me to His service. ¹³Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and the love that are in Christ Jesus.

DAVE BAST

¹⁵Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance; Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶But for that very reason I was shown mercy, so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His immense patience as an example for those who would believe in Him and receive eternal life. ¹⁷Now to the king eternal, immortal, invisible; the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen, indeed. And so, there is Paul as we said, just at the end of the last segment, Dave, Timothy is ministering in Ephesus, a very hard city – a hard city to make a dent in with the Gospel. Timothy had to be... I mean, the odds of the Gospel's making it in Ephesus were – the odds were long. People were sinful. We know historically there were sexual practices in Ephesus that would make you blush, even to admit knowing about such things, much less having to confront them; and so, here comes Timothy. We believe he was a young man. Paul makes some references to that elsewhere in the two letters. Here he comes with these people who are carousing, and the booze is flowing freely, and Timothy has a little water for baptism, a little bread

and wine for the Lord's Supper, and a message, and it just looks like he does not have a chance.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you are up against it, Timothy; but Paul says: Do not worry, because there is power in this message, and here it is boiled down to its essence: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, which is a beautiful capsule version of the whole Gospel, really; but then Paul adds: Of whom I am chief, in the old version, or I am the worst. I was the worst of all sinners; and you cannot help but wonder: Come on, Paul. Are you serious? Is this just sort of dramatic exaggeration? But no, I think he really meant it, that as he looked at himself, as he viewed his own life, he considered himself to be far worse than those crazy, wild, drunken, sex-crazed, idolatrous people in Ephesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and I think for Paul, at least part of the reason was... Of course, he was a very devout Jew; he was a Pharisee; he actually was a very religious man, but I think what haunted Paul was that all of the violence he did was *against* the name of Jesus itself, right? So, the one he now serves as Lord, that was the one he was actively against. He was not just sort of a mindless, college-aged kid getting drunk on the weekend. What Paul did was anti-Jesus. It was anti-Christ. Because he could not stand it, so he said: Look, Timothy, you know when the first deacon was stoned to death? I was there holding people's coats, and when the stone thudded into Stephen's head, I said: Good; I approve. I beat men up. I hauled them to jail. I made their women and children watch. I did terrible things all because I hated Jesus; and look, He got me; and if He can get me, Timothy, He can get anybody. So, be encouraged in Ephesus.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you know, it is striking, I think, that Paul's sins were of the sort of spiritual kind, not the physical or sensual kind. I mean, most of us, if we hear the phrase: Boy, that person is a real sinner. They are the worst of sinners. We think... immediately our minds go toward sex or alcohol...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Drugs.

DAVE BAST

Drugs or something like that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Crime.

DAVE BAST

Yes, down in the gutter. Paul was respectable. He was sober. He was hard working. He was successful. He was honorable in the sense of being held in honor by his society; but he was a vicious persecutor of heretics, and he went after them tooth and nail; and he himself says: I was violent; I was cruel; and all the while thinking he was doing God's will. The word that comes to my mind is: Ayatollah. He was the First Century equivalent of an Ayatollah, and that is the worst kind of sinner, to not be filled with some kind of what we call the milk of human kindness. You can be a very, very respectable person and actually be the worst of sinners.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And, again, what Paul is saying to his young friend, Pastor Timothy... He was saying: Pastor Timothy, if you had known me then – if you could have seen me then – you would have thought the same thing you are thinking about those people in Ephesus right now that are scowling at you when you mention Jesus. You would have thought: This guy can never be saved. There is not enough power in the world to save that Saul of Tarsus guy; but Paul said, but Jesus did; and so, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. This was a catch phrase that was circulating among the early Christians as the Gospel in a nutshell, and Paul said: That is right. Christ Jesus did come – He did not come to save saints, He did not come to save nice people, He did

not come to save... because maybe someday people could figure out salvation on their own; no, no, no. He came for people who are as bad off as they could be. That is His business; that is His job; so, keep preaching the message, Timothy; keep telling people to repeat that catch phrase: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; and believe me, it will work. Jesus will get through.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; you know, it puts me in mind of another famous verse that Paul wrote in Romans Chapter 1, where he talks about not being ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. A little bit later here in I Timothy 1 he talks about the importance of faith – of believing – that Christ saved me so that He might display His immense patience as an example for those who would believe in Him and receive eternal life. So look, again, if you are hesitating about whether you should believe or whether you could believe or whether God would even want you to believe because of what you have done, or whatever, look at Paul. That is what he is saying. Just believe in this good news that Christ Jesus came to save people like you and people like me, and you receive eternal life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what is interesting, you know, in the centuries – the twenty or so centuries since Paul wrote these words to Timothy – Christian scholars and theologians and pastors – we have written enough books to fill whole libraries – commentaries – but if every one of those books disappeared tomorrow, but we still had the phrase, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” we would still have the whole Gospel. That, of course, means that this has enormous implications for the Church yet today, and I think we want to consider that in our final segment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork; and Scott, you just said something really profound, I think. If we lost the whole Bible, but still held onto this trustworthy saying, which anyone can memorize in about 15 seconds: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; we would still have the whole thing right there – the whole Gospel. It strikes me that there is a lot more behind these words – a lot of truth that we could unpack. For example, Christ Jesus came into the world. We do not speak that way of ordinary people. We do not say: Scott Hoezee came into the world in order to teach preaching at Calvin Seminary. We are just born; but Jesus – behind that is the idea that He was God, and He did come down into the world in a unique way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, that is the wonderful thing about, I think, a lot of these trustworthy saying is that you can unpack them. I mean, you have Christ, which is the title Messiah; you have Jesus, which is from the Hebrew God saves; He came into the world, incarnation – the whole Christmas story – to save sinners, atonement...

DAVE BAST

There is Calvary – the cross – it is all there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Resurrection... So, there is a lot of... This is fraught with background, as they say; there is a lot, lot behind it, and that makes it that more powerful of an encapsulation summary of the Gospel; but it also means that it is powerful for us today, or it should be.

I think one implication of this being such a core Gospel summary statement even yet today is that it should encourage us the same way it did Timothy. I mean, our world is getting more secular every day, too.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely. You know, there are mornings when I wish I didn't read the news; or often now with the Internet, you can kind of roam online and interesting things catch your eye, and before you know it you are reading somebody else who is slamming the idea of God even existing or who is knocking the Church or who is

promoting some alternative sort of philosophy or world view. Sometimes I sit there and I think: Man, are we losing? Are we in trouble? Will there even be any Christians? I often think with melancholy of a little verse from Luke that Jesus said: When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth? And sometimes you wonder.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; well, and at the time that we are recording this particular program it is much in the news that recent surveys have shown a decline in people who self-identify as Christians in North America and in the United States in particular. More and more people checking that “none” box on religious preference: I have no preference. We can be discouraged by that, and of course, other religions are on the rise. Islam, Hinduism, other faiths are on the rise as people from different parts of the world move to Canada and the United States; and we could worry, like Timothy no doubt did in Ephesus, are the odds too long for the Gospel to survive, and I think Paul would bring us back to this faithful saying, and say, “Oh, no...”

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely. No.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No. That is why He came.

DAVE BAST

No, exactly; and as long as there are people who hear this and respond there will be a Church. As long as there are people who recognize themselves to be sinners in need of saving, and that somehow this is beyond them – beyond their power – they are going to turn to the Savior with love and faith and embrace Him, and the Church will go on. So, do not worry. We have a truth that many people desperately long to hear.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think a second thing that should encourage us, even as believers sometimes, even those of us who maybe were raised in the Church, there are those times when we think: I do not know, if people really knew what I was like, they would not like me. If they knew what I did in secret or what I think sometimes about other people... I do not know if even God could forgive me. Again, the encouraging word is: Of course He can. That is Jesus’ business.

DAVE BAST

Yes; He came for people like you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; there is grace sufficient to cover all of your sins.

DAVE BAST

For people like me, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That hyper-abounds. So I think we can take encouragement about that at those times when we are kind of feeling down on ourselves.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right, and don’t we all? But I love something that Luther said. He was writing to a friend of his, in fact – a personal letter – who was feeling down and discouraged about a lot of things, including himself; and Luther said: Never come to the point where you get so righteous that you do not think of yourself as a sinner, for Christ dwells only in sinners. You think of what Jesus Himself said: I did not come to call the righteous but sinners. The only kinds of people who have Christ within are people who are sinners and who know they need Him and who have responded in faith to Him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and that He is the only one who could possibly do it. But finally, as we round out this program, Dave, maybe a third thing we could think about in implication of this faithful saying... and this one maybe comes as a little more of a challenge to the Church, depending on where you go to church, this shoe might pinch more in some places than in others, but there is that idea that we said earlier, that these faithful sayings are like a window on history. This is what the early Church said was the most important thing – the core of the Gospel: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Well, if so, then what does it mean in some places where we have kind of stopped talking about sin, or that sinfulness is a turnoff for people, and so we have sermons that focus on personal success and personal growth and happiness in your families. Well, if we cannot still talk about sin and sinners, then we have cut ourselves off from the core of this faithful saying, and then you sort of think we have cut ourselves off from our earliest sisters and brothers in the faith and what they thought was core.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely core. You know, maybe the message for us is we have to get back to basics in the Church today; and the most basic of the basics is the truth about humankind – about human nature. We are not all that we are cracked up to be. We are not all that we sometimes think ourselves to be. It is true you can kind of overindulge in this kind of, oh, I am a miserable, lost so-and-so; but I think the cultural moment that we live in swings way to the opposite extreme, where people are encouraged to think of the god within and somehow the spark of divinity that inhabits them. No, no, no. We are sinners in need of a savior, and this is the most basic message of all.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, the saying that we have been looking at on this program is, as Paul said, worthy of full acceptance, and it is also worthy of nonstop proclamation, and I think, as you just said, Dave, most especially these days. Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue to dig deeper into the scriptures. So, you can visit our website, groundworkonline.com, and suggest some topics and passages for future programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/christ-came-to-save-sinners>

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