Say it Out Loud – "God Loves Sinners!"

God unlimited grace and mercy are yours – through Jesus Christ. Amen!

I have not personally attended such a meeting, I've only seen them portrayed in TV shows and in movies, and perhaps you have too. A group of people, maybe 8 or 10 or 12, gathers in a room; usually they're sitting in chairs in a circle. One of them is asked to begin, and they do so, rather sheepishly and hesitantly, "Hi, my name is Steve, and I _____..." You know the scenario… as the person shares struggles and challenges; or bears their feelings of failure and embarrassment. No one really wants to say those kinds of things out loud.

Some of the key principles for such a group are openness, honesty, trust, confidentiality and mutual respect. Afterall, you're there to support and encourage, to be a source of strength for one another. Such a group and its meetings can definitely have a positive impact on a person's life.

In a way, the words of our Second Lesson resemble one of these meetings. Even though this is a letter between two people, you'll see very quickly how each of us could very easily pull up a chair and join the group. It starts off with a fellow whose done it all. Over the years, he's done a lot of jail time. He's been on the wrong end of mob-violence and major city uprisings. He's been left for dead numerous times. Because of his past, he could very easily be crushed under a load of guilt – you can almost hear him start the meeting with, "Hi, my name is Paul, and I'm a sinner."

While the Apostle Paul is correct in his personal self-assessment, he doesn't stop there. He doesn't dwell on himself – he focuses on what God has done for him. Paul is not afraid to "Say it out loud" that he is a sinner because he knows this incredible truth: "God LOVES sinners." This short but mighty phrase speaks volumes about our God and what he thinks about us. So, pull up a chair and join the circle as we consider exactly what it means that God Loves Sinners.

I. Sinners – who are not worthy

When it comes to committing sin – Paul knew that he was at the top of the list. Paul had a clear understanding of what God says about sin. Sin literally means to miss the mark of being holy and perfect, just as God is holy and perfect. Picture shooting a bow and arrow at a target – even if you get close, anything except a bullseye is sin. Sin is crossing the line, doing, saying, even thinking things about which God says, "No." Sin is rebellion against God, directly, willfully doing the opposite of what God says. And when we sin, there are just consequences. The Scriptures make that *plain too. "The wages of sin – is death." (Romans 6:23); or "The soul who sins is the one who will die." (Ezekiel 18:4)* And then there's original sin – our parents were sinners and they begat sinful children.

Paul had checked every one of those "sin-boxes" and he knew that when he said in verse 15, "*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst."* Paul is not boasting or bragging about his sinful accomplishments. He is not proud of his past; he simply, openly, honestly, truthfully says it out loud and admits, *"I am a sinner. I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man."* These are some very descriptive words!

A Blasphemer: one who uses wicked and hateful language towards the true God and tries to get others to do the same. A Persecutor: the picture is that of wild animals (like pack of wolves hunting down deer, preying on the weak). That's what Paul did, back in the days when he was known as Saul. Christians feared him; they ran from him and scattered in all directions because of his reputation as A Violent man towards God's people. Paul has given to God 1000's of reasons why he should have been wiped him off the face of this earth and condemned him to hell eternally… and, being honest, open and truthful - so have we. We have sinned just as badly.

Those ungodly thoughts that linger in our hearts – guilty. The gossip that puts down our neighbor's reputation – guilty. That pride and self-righteousness that likes to boast about me – guilty. Those unloving, impatient, self-centered deeds – guilty. Perhaps we have never intentionally set out to scatter God's people, but how actively have we sought after straying sheep. How little have we encouraged those who are hurting. How often have we failed to let the light of the Gospel shine? Those are sins just as punishable as any.

Hi, I'm Steve – and I'm a sinner. There's no pointing fingers or blaming others. I am guilty. I too am the worst of sinners. I too deserve God's wrath and punishment. Truth be told - there is reason that God should show me one ounce of mercy and withhold his judgment.

II. Sinners – who have been shown His mercy

Yet before Paul is lost in a sea of guilt, shame and utter despair, he says this: *[13]Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, **I was shown mercy.*** Even though he deserved it, the Almighty God withheld his judgment and instead demonstrated His mercy. What kind of God do we have who refrains from what we deserve - and

freely chooses to show mercy?

Go to the cross on Good Friday. Remember those soldiers who were simply "doing their job" driving nails through the hands and feet of our Savior? No doubt there were people nearby cheering each time the hammer hit its mark, but those soldiers, following orders, had no idea they were crucifying God Almighty. What do we hear? Mercy!! *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*

That's the same prayer Jesus prays for you and for me! Father, forgive them. Father, be merciful. Father, withhold your judgment; do not cast them into hell, Father. Let me pay for their sins. Father, I will take their place. Father, I will pay the price for every one of their evil, vile, sinful things they have ever thought, said or done, or ever will do. I will rescue them, because they cannot rescue themselves.

That is mercy; that is help for us who are helpless. Such mercy is only found in the heart of our God, and it doesn't just sit there, mercy leaps into action. Paul puts it so vividly, *"the grace of our Lord has been poured out abundantly, along with faith and love that are only in Christ Jesus."* It's like overfilling an already full cup! First off, the Almighty God withholds his judgment, and then he treats us with mercy, compassion, and love, sending Jesus to rescue us, forgive us and claim us as his own! To us, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus has displayed his unlimited patience. This is truly something to shout out loud, just as Paul does:

[15]Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. [16]But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life."

Give your heart a moment to grasp this truth: Christ Jesus came – not just as a babe in Bethlehem, but his entire life, his excruciating death and his glorious resurrection – by all these, he won forgiveness, life and salvation for ***all*** sinners, for you, for me, for the worst of sinners. God so loved *the world…* and that includes all the sinners in the world, big and little, young and old, near and far.

Jesus accomplished salvation for each and every sinner, but the sad part is – far too many sinners refuse to believe it. Many simply don't know the true God. Others don't see their sin as that big of an issue. Too often people refuse to hear God's call to repent and turn from their sin; while others ignore what God calls sin, choosing instead to write their own version of right and wrong. God loves sinners – that is clear when you look at Jesus and his committed love to rescue sinners – but sinners don't always love God, choosing instead to follow their own heart's desires – which is exactly why Paul encourages Timothy, and us, to keep on keeping on.

III. Sinners – who have been appointed to His Service

As a young Pastor serving in Ephesus, Timothy would face many challenges. False teachers - furthering Satan's lies…. People - living however their sinful nature desires to live. Yet in the midst of all this – we see the committed Love of God again. In verse 12 Paul says, *"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service."* God is so committed to getting the truth of the Gospel out – that he appoints sinners to go tell other sinners.

Paul, admits he was the least deserving of this appointment, but, in his wisdom and love, *"Christ Jesus considered me faithful."* From God's almighty omniscient perspective, He saw that Paul was faithful and able to serve, in spite of his past. Paul was grateful to serve; and so was Timothy. In Paul's earlier letter to the Ephesians, he wrote, *"For it is Christ …who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up."* (Eph 4:11-12). God who appointed Paul and Timothy as overseers of his flock, would most certainly provide the strength to serve others with the saving message of the Gospel. He's not afraid to say it out loud.

While these words speak directly of pastors and teachers, the truth of being God's witness applies to all Christians. Let you light shine before men – that they may praise our Father in Heaven! Keep on keeping on – letting your light shine as you bring your children to the feet of Jesus… in worship, in devotional reading, in bed-time Bible stories and prayer. What a powerful impact happens right in the home – letting your children know, God loves sinners!

Perhaps you are "say it out loud" in a more public way, helping to teach Sunday school or read devotions to elderly members who can't make it to church… Perhaps you can sing it out loud, letting God's praises resound in song and music! Perhaps you can write out that card of encouragement to the friend who recently lost a loved one. There are so many powerful ways to "say it out loud" and remind others of God's great love.

God, who has had mercy on you, has also called and appointed you to be his witness, to let His Truth, His light, His Love, His Mercy shine. May we continue to let it be heard out loud – God Loves Sinners. Amen.