

1 Tim 1:12-17 (ESV)

12 I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, 13 though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. 17 To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord (2Peter 1:2). Amen.

The Marikana massacre. The e-toll debacle. The Dept. of Home Affairs and the endless waiting for unforthcoming documentation. Nkandla. The Waterkloof landings. Omar al-Bashir's precipitous departure and lack of arrest. The undocumented influx of Chinese imports and nationals. The state of South African roads. The load shedding debacle, the awarding of coal supply tenders, and the deferred maintenance of ESKOM power stations. How SA came to host the Soccer World Cup. Corrupt traffic officials, corrupt government officials, and the "buying of cooldrinks." What do all these things have in common? Need I ask? All of these things miraculously happened. There is no one responsible for them. They just happened. Not that they are victimless crimes – no, indeed, there are many victims – rather, these are perpetrations with no perpetrators, felonies with no felons, crimes with no criminals. If we had to choose a popular hit song as the theme soundtrack for these and similar phenomena happening in our country, we would have to go with the hit song by Shaggy: "It wasn't me." For as soon as anyone does try to find a guilty party, someone responsible, the criminal behind the crime, the music always starts playing: "It wasn't me." We provide unnecessary and unwanted gymnastic exercise to people whose strongest muscle seems to be the index finger.

Yes, we are being facetious. But behind the facetiousness lies a bitter truth: No matter how quick we are to appoint blame, those who are blamed are even quicker at shifting the blame and pointing at others. And before we say that everything was better in the old days,

we should remember that finger-pointing is as old as sin itself. When Samuel confronts King Saul because he made a sacrifice, Saul sings: “It wasn’t me,” and points at his soldiers who deserted him, and at Samuel for coming late. When Moses confronts Aaron because of the golden calf, he sings: “It wasn’t me,” and points to the people of Israel and their faithless mischief. When God confronts Adam for eating of the tree, Adam does his best imitation of Shaggy: “It wasn’t me,” and points to Eve, and Eve in turn points to the serpent. In fact, after the original sin against the first commandment, and after Adam and Eve hide from God, the very next sin was finger-pointing and the deflection of blame. It was the refusal to own up to sin and to confess guilt.

As Lutherans, we know that one of the chief uses of the law is to function as a mirror, to show that God’s righteous finger accuses those who break His Law, and to say: “It was you. You did this. You are guilty.” And St. Paul has been doing just that. He is instructing his young student Timothy on how to be a good pastor, on how to preach and teach. And he has just charged Timothy not to teach the way certain false teachers of the law were teaching, false preachers who devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies which promote speculation. These “teachers of the law” got the law wrong. And Paul is quick to point it out. He is just as quick to add though that the problem does not lie with the law. We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel... Yes, this is the accusing finger of the law of God, and what a horrible list of accusations this is. You see, the false “law teachers” whom Timothy was to warn had no idea that God’s law is meant for “wicked sinners in accord with the gospel; they played with it in fanciful, rabbinical ways just as they played with the genealogies in Moses by spinning myths and fabulous tales around the ancient names mentioned in them.” (Lenski, 1 Tim., 5:15). Paul calls on them to wake up to the fact that the Law of God is not there to mess around with; no, the Law of God always accuses sinners of their sin, and sin is always horrible.

Now at this point we might expect Paul to distance himself from the so-called teachers of the law by pointing to his clean record as an apostle, as he does elsewhere; by showing that he teaches the Gospel of Christ selflessly and that his ministry is therefore better than theirs. But he does just the opposite. After that nasty list of explicit sins, Paul sings a

different tune. He points his finger at himself, and he sings: That list of sins? “It was me.” I am guilty. Here Paul bares his soul and gives a burning confession of his sin against God. I am a sinner. I am the chief of sinners. I blasphemed against God. I used the most wicked and hateful language against God and tried to force others to do the same. I chased the Lord’s people like animals, I acted like an animal myself, I even persecuted the Lord Jesus himself, and I was unrepentant, insolent against God, brazen in my sin. ἐποίησα, it was me, I did it. I was ignorant, I acted in unbelief. It was me.

Why does Paul make confession? Why not point the finger at the false teachers? Why does he speak of his own sinfulness like this? It is because Paul has grasped something very fundamental. It is this: The false teachers get the Law wrong. And because they get the Law wrong, they get the Gospel wrong. The truth is: God’s Law accuses; God’s Law kills. It accuses even the one who might seem so saintly here, Paul himself. But Paul knows: If he did not face the Law, then he could not face the Gospel. If he did not receive the Law, then he could not receive the Gospel. And if he did not preach the Law, then he could not preach the Gospel. Whoever evades the Law with “it wasn’t me” also cannot receive the Gospel’s “This is for you.” Paul knows this because Paul experienced in his own life just like Zacchaeus had, just like the adulterous woman in John 8 had, just like the woman at the well had, that Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners – not to save the innocent (or rather, the pretend innocent), no, to save sinners, and if Jesus is to save sinners, then they must first be sinners, and this is the good and lawful use of the Law of God, to show sin to be sin, to show sinners that they are sinners, to diagnose the sick unto death and to lay the finger on their death sentence – in order to save them. Paul had experienced that in himself. He had received that in himself. He was the passive and completely undeserving recipient of God’s mercy and grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Paul received this in his own baptism under the hands of Ananias, and it is why he hammers it home in Titus 3:5 He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. Paul recalls in the flowing of water and the Holy Spirit the overflowing grace of our Lord, overflowing with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Dear friends, overworked index fingers are not just a problem for other people. They are a problem for all sinners. The truth is: There is no excuse for your sin. You are a sinner. You too should say: Of the sinners, I am the foremost, the chief. For while you have heard of the sins of others, it is only your own sins that you know and feel under the implacable

accusation of the Law of God. But take heart! If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1) So do not shift the blame. Confess your sins and return to your baptism, be cleansed by the overflowing grace of your Lord. Be mercied, like Paul, be healed, be restored, in the mercy of Jesus that is for you. And then join Paul in pointing a finger of a different kind – the finger of praise, the finger of credit, the finger of doxology. Say it, say with Paul: I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, me, the chief of sinners. Yes, point a finger to Christ Jesus who came into this world to save sinners. Indeed, point a finger to the King of Ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, to whom be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
Pastor Karl Böhmer