

A sermon “Overflowing mercy”
From 1 Timothy 1:12-17
Preached at Plymouth Presbyterian Church
St. Helens, Oregon
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Someone once said the only constant in life is change. We know it well. Our hair changes color—or falls out. Our children grow up and move out, and then grandchildren come along to humble us again. I was humbled yesterday while spinning my grandkids around. When the spinning game stopped, I nearly took out the patio furniture with my stumbling dizziness. The economy shifts, jobs are lost or gained. Marriages sometimes break down; loved ones pass away. Life changes, and it keeps changing.

Most of us try to control the tempo of life, doing our best to maintain the status quo. We move to larger homes as our families grow, or relocate for better jobs. We make new friends as our kids join new activities. We find a church to anchor us. And yet, underneath it all, most of us would rather nothing changed. We like our routines, our familiar friends, our unchallenged attitudes. By the time we reach thirty, some say, we’re set in patterns that will last a lifetime.

But here is the good news: in the midst of constant change, one thing does not change—God’s overflowing mercy. And when that mercy breaks in, life itself takes on a new direction.

Three Kinds of Change

There are times when change forces itself upon us. Sometimes it comes through a joyful event: a wedding, the birth of a child, a new job. Other times, change arrives through tragedy: a sudden death, a devastating diagnosis, or a catastrophic event like September 11 or Hurricane Katrina. People uprooted from everything familiar must begin again, and life will never look the same.

But the most radical change comes when a person encounters God. That was true for the Apostle Paul. By his own admission, he was once a blasphemer, persecutor, and man of violence. Then, on the Damascus Road, Christ met him with overflowing mercy. His life was turned upside down—and he never got over it. He told the story at least three times in Acts, and again in his letters, including the one to Timothy. Instead of resenting the change, Paul gave thanks. He embraced it as an opportunity to live a new life, to count his blessings, to lean wholly on God’s mercy.

Stories of Mercy

Paul’s story isn’t unique. Many of us have our own “before and after” stories.

A pastor friend once told me about a saint in his congregation—a generous, loving, prayerful man. Everyone admired him. But when this man shared his testimony, it stunned the pastor. His past included alcoholism, anger, and infidelity. His family was torn apart. Then one day, he met Christ at a revival. He quit drinking, learned to master his temper and his tongue, and began rebuilding his family. Today, with humility, he says: “Thank God I’m not the man I used to be.”

That's overflowing mercy. Mercy that forgives the past, mercy that makes us new. Mercy that doesn't just patch us up but transforms us from the inside out.

Paul says that God forgave his past—set him free from guilt and shame. Then, God gave him the power to change. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul became more than he ever dreamed possible. “All things are possible with God,” he reminds us. That's the truth of overflowing mercy.

Change Becomes a Gift

A funny thing happens when we start looking at life this way: change no longer frightens us. Instead of resisting it, we can welcome it as God's gift.

Think of Weight Watchers' philosophy: imagine what you'll feel like, look like, and be doing in the future. The vision of what's possible propels the change. Paul understood that. He saw himself as a work in progress—a new creation still being shaped by mercy. His past no longer defined him, and his future was secure in Christ.

So it is with us. We, too, are growing. Our faith is strengthening. Our confidence in sharing Christ is deepening. Paul said faith is like childhood—you grow into maturity over time. And all along the way, overflowing mercy carries you.

Even the thorns in our flesh—our illnesses, struggles, or baggage—are not the final word. They remind us to lean on mercy. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15: “We will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” What a promise! Alzheimer's will not win. Strokes will not win. Cancer will not win. Overflowing mercy will have the last word.

Living in the Present

And that brings us to today. Too many of us are trapped in the past or anxious about the future. We never rejoice in the present. But Paul shows us another way. He begins his testimony to Timothy by thanking God for his calling. He's fully engaged in the moment. That's what overflowing mercy does—it roots us in gratitude for now.

A Red Sox Redemption

Let me share a modern picture of change. In 2004, the Boston Red Sox faced the New York Yankees in the American League Championship Series. They were down three games to none. For 86 years, they had lived under “the curse of the Bambino.” Every time they got close, something went wrong. Then, against all odds, they won four straight games, then swept the St. Louis Cardinals to win the World Series.

By the next season, something had shifted. The curse was gone. The weight of failure was lifted. The team could play with freedom and joy.

That's what Christ does for us. He lifts the curse. Sin no longer defines us. Fear no longer binds us. Because of Christ's overflowing mercy, we are free to live, free to hope, free to rejoice.

Overflowing Mercy for You

So what about you? What changes are you facing right now? A diagnosis? An empty nest? A job transition? A wound from the past that still aches?

Hear this: Overflowing mercy is for you. Mercy that forgives your past, empowers your present, and secures your future. Mercy that turns change from something to fear into something to celebrate. Imagine a new future.

Paul's words to Timothy are words for us: "I received mercy." So have we. So can you. And that mercy never runs dry—it keeps overflowing.

So today, rejoice. Thank God that you are not who you used to be. Thank God you are not yet who you will be. And thank God for now, for the mercy that meets you in this moment. That is the power of overflowing mercy.

Amen.