



OWN IT

A couple of years back, popstar Dua Lipa was being interviewed by *The Late Show's* Stephen Colbert. Part way through, they swapped roles, and she got the chance to ask *him* a question ...

"Something I think your viewers connect with ... is how open and honest you are about the role your faith plays in your life. Do your faith and your comedy ever overlap? Does one ever win out?"

His answer, slightly abridged, went like this:

"Well, I certainly hope when I get to heaven Jesus has a sense of humour! I'm a Christian, and a Catholic, and connected to that is the idea of love and sacrifice and giving yourself for other people. And death is not defeat – if you can see what I'm getting at there." He then cites the movie *Belfast*. "It's funny, sad, and it's funny about being sad. Sadness is like a little emotional death but not a defeat, if you can find a way to laugh about it ... so if there's some relationship between my faith and my comedy, it's that, no matter what happens, you are never defeated, and you must see this in light of eternity and find some way to love and laugh with each other."

Colbert's reply is stonkingly good. But it's not so much what he says: it's *how*.

And that's the theme of today's 1 Timothy passage (and it's a really important one):

1 Timothy 1:12-20

Paul has sent Timothy to Ephesus, to sort out a church that has started to unravel, over all sorts of issues: some vital, some important, some not. But then he says this:

"Jesus came to save sinners. And I'm the worst."

Paul's description of himself is difficult. Worst of sinners? In comparison to who? Emperor Nero? Genghis Khan? Adolf Hitler? Read against the backdrop of thousands of years of human history, it might be hard to take seriously.

So, what are we to make of it? Paul here is picking up on a major problem in Ephesus: a serious heart issue.

They had become self-righteous. Which makes this ...

A lesson in DIY open heart-surgery. There are 4 steps:

1) Start with where you were (vs12-13). For some of us, our lives were a mess before we met Jesus: we know what He's saved us from. But if you were brought up in the faith, that can be tricky: you have no point of reference.

What's interesting is that Paul could have fallen into that trap, too – albeit, from a Jewish perspective. Brought up as an observant Jew, part of God's set-apart people, trained as a pharisee by the great Rabbi Gamaliel I. He would have had every reason to see himself as righteous.

But Paul here is honest enough to admit, "I wasn't."

The point is: if you find yourself forgetting this or never having realised it ... look for the fault lines! Be honest with yourself, use your imagination, and say, "God has shown me mercy." Which leads us onto this:

2) Proceed to where you are (vs14). Paul is making it clear here that we would still be screw-ups if it wasn't for this 1 thing: grace. God's riches, at Christ's expense. And with it, the faith we're called to and the love God has for us.

As Paul says in Galatians 3:28, it's not about whether you're Jew or Gentile, slave or freeman, man or woman. In God's eyes everyone is equally guilty (even if the severity of our sins might differ), but everyone is also equally loved and valued and welcomed. No matter who you are, where you come from, or what you've done. But it also means, as Paul says in Ephesians 2, that no-one can boast (in themselves, at least. We'll come to that).

So, we need to remind ourselves, every day:

"I am what I am, because of Jesus. Not because of *me*."

3) Finish with where you will be (vs15). What does Paul mean by 'save' here? Is he thinking past? Present? Future? Yes! Jesus has saved us from the penalty of sin; He's saving us from the power of sin; and one day He'll save us from the presence of it, too (Romans 8:23).

Looking back, I was hugely conscious of the things I'd got wrong when I finally knelt down and gave my life to Jesus. But I didn't know the half of it. God, on the other hand, knew *all* of it. And like Paul here, God has had to show me how screwed up I *really* am. But –

Praise God: there is progress (for all of us, not just me!). And because of Jesus' resurrection, we can know that our destination is a cast-iron guarantee (1 Corinthians 15).

So, those are the first 3 steps. But then there's this:

4) Now do the same for them (vs16). Why is Paul saying all this? He tells us: "God has shown me, even *me*, mercy. So that people can know that, however screwed up they are, God can show *them* mercy; that God can change *them*; that God has a plan and purpose for *them*. If they trust Him." I.e. if He can save me, He can save *anyone*.

But for them to get that message, we have to show it.

That means we need to be patient with people, spend time with them, and love them, in the messiness. And when we're sharing the gospel, not begin with, "You're a sinner." But with, "God made you, He knows you, and He loves you. And we have all – *all* – rejected Him, in some way. But He still loves us – enough to come and show us."

Because without that, *none* of us would be here.

Now To The King Eternal ...

At this point, Paul suddenly launches into a song – one of several hymns or doxologies in the letter. And He spells out a whole lot of truths about Jesus: that He's King; that He always has been, always will be; that we can't see Him at present but He's there; and that He's the only one. And then this: "To Him be honour and glory for ever and ever."

I.e. He, and He alone, is worthy – not us. Amen!

Now this message does come with a caveat: there may be times in our lives, and in our church, when we need to create distance – as Paul had to do with Hymenaeus and Alexander, who had shipwrecked their faith and were of risk to others (vs20; 2 Timothy 2:16-18). But that should always be a last resort.

So, what difference might this make to our church? To how we see our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ: how we treat them; how we handle the disagreements? And what difference might it make to our witness? To how we see our not-yet-Christian neighbours: how we treat them; how we talk to them about our faith?

In your interactions, remember: their story isn't over, yet. But how you treat them could make all the difference.

So, as Paul says in Colossians 4:6 ... be gracious.