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I Timothy 1:12-17  
THANK GOD I DIDN'T DO IT 'MY WAY'!

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Frank Sinatra was one of the most famous and successful Americans of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He did just about everything. He was an actor, starring in many movies. He was a singer, selling millions of gold records. He was an entertainer, filling concert halls and show rooms in Las Vegas night after night. He was successful, good looking, wealthy and greatly admired. He dated and was married to beautiful women. Many women would throw themselves at him, hoping to have a chance. He hung around with the rich and famous, including presidents of corporations and the President of the United States. People wanted a picture, an autograph, anything to say that they had met Sinatra.

One of his famous songs, done toward the end of his career was the song "My Way." One could say that the song really described him. He was a man that many if not most would say that he had it made and it was self-made. Listen to some of the lyrics: "I've lived a life that's full. I've traveled each and every highway. But much, much more than this I did it my way. Regrets, I've had a few but then again, too few to mention. I did what I had to do and saw it through without exemption. For what is a man, what has he got? If not himself, then he has naught. To say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who kneels. The record shows I took the blows and did it my way."

I don't know if Frank Sinatra is in heaven, but if he is it isn't because he did it his way. King Solomon says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." You can have all the money in the world, fame, popularity and adoration, but if you don't have Christ, your way will lead to death.

The Apostle Paul could have been the Sinatra of his day. He was a man who was indeed well-known. He was respected by the religious community. He was a Pharisee who came from a family of Pharisees. He was extremely knowledgeable in the matter of the Law of Moses. He was indeed an up and comer. And his major contribution: he was going to personally root out this dangerous new religion that preached a Jesus of Nazareth as the very Son of God who was crucified and rose from the dead on the third day. He would personally seek out Christians, arrest them, imprison them and urge that they be killed. That was his mission. He even believed that he was doing God a favor.

Everything would change on the road to Damascus. Saul of Tarsus would meet the very Jesus Christ that he tried to denounce and pass off as a lie. Jesus would ask him the question: "Why do you persecute me?" Saul would become a Christian and he would become our Lord's apostle to the Gentiles, the very non-Jews that he had previously despised.

Everything that Saul had learned would now become unlearned. He would lead a very difficult life. He would never be fully trusted by many. Could you blame them? If you had good friends or members of your family arrested by this man, would you really trust him? In the back of your mind, you're still thinking, "It's a trick!" On the other hand, he would be considered a traitor and a turncoat by the people he formerly considered his closest friends. He would be beaten and run out of town. There would be attempts on his life.

And yet he could write: "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service." This man, now renamed Paul, expresses his confidence and his thankfulness. He would later say to the Philippians, "I can do all things through him who gives me strength."

For the next few weeks we will study Paul's words to a young pastor named Timothy. Timothy needed encouragement as he served the congregation in Ephesus. He could use a mentor, but he would not engage in hero worship. Paul would never allow that. Paul would never point to himself but he would point to our Savior and his marvelous grace. You can hear Paul saying: THANK GOD I DIDN'T DO IT MY WAY!

Paul tells his story many times in Scripture. How many of us would want to tell ours? It is not the story of a man who did it "my way." It is the story about how his way would have led him straight to hell for all eternity. Paul does not mince words. He does not try to portray himself in any flattering way at all to make himself look better. On the contrary he describes himself as a person very few of us would ever want to meet. He was a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man.

Let Paul himself describe his former life: "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."

Paul said that he was shown mercy because he acted in ignorance and belief. He was not making excuses. Ignorance is no excuse. Paul really was convinced that he was doing right. Sin does that. Satan can make us believe almost anything. Paul saw himself as one of those that Jesus prayed for on the cross as he spoke, "Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing."

God's grace was poured out on him abundantly. We think of the picture of a glass filled by a little child. It is filled to overflowing and more! Grace is the very opposite of what we deserve. We know what Paul deserved and Paul knew what Paul deserved. Do you think he sang, "Regrets, I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention?" I think he had the picture of the stoning of Stephen in his mind. He could think of arrests and imprisonments, separating families perhaps for the rest of their earthly lives. Those things would always be with him. He was forgiven by his Savior, but he would never forget what he had been.

Paul gives Timothy and us a trustworthy saying. It is absolutely reliable. It is absolute truth. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." You've heard that one before, haven't you? You've heard it time and time again. You hear it every Sunday morning. You've heard it on Christmas as you look at the very Son of God lying in a manger. He is given the name Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. You've heard it on Good Friday as you look at the very Lamb of God on the cross with the sin of the world absorbed into his body. You've heard it on Easter Sunday as our risen Savior puts an exclamation point to his work. He is risen! Sin, death and Satan have been defeated. Yes, Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners!

But have we heard it too many times? Do we take it for granted? Do we hope that we get some other message that will encourage us to take matters into our own hands and do it my way? Once again we must look at what sin is. Sin is not merely bad things that we occasionally do. Sin is the very condition of our hearts. Everything starts there and it's not very good. The Law serves as a mirror to show us our sins. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength." "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus reminds us that anger and hatred are

murder. Lust is adultery. We have all slandered and gossiped against our fellow man and we have greedily coveted the things of others. Can we really think that we have shown perfect love every second of every day?

We try to make excuses. Yes, I make mistakes, but everybody makes mistakes! Nobody's perfect! I try as hard as I can! Do we really believe that? Do we really try as hard as we can to not sin? Sometimes there are things that we cannot wait to do. We scheme and plan ways to get revenge when someone has wronged us. We know exactly what we're going to say. We know exactly what we are going to do. We think it can never be traced back to us. We cover our tracks. We lie, often! We think that we can fool others. We think that just because we have not committed some of the greater sins that God will simply ignore it and go after somebody else. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

We don't like to confess our sins. We don't want to confess our sins. We want to maintain the illusion to others and to ourselves that we can indeed do it my way. What would you say if a person came up to you and offered you a pill? "It will make all your hair fall out. You're going to lose your appetite. You will be sick for a number of months." Wouldn't you run away from this pervert? But suppose this man is your doctor? You've been diagnose with cancer. The cancer is curable if you take chemotherapy. Now it's different, isn't it? You stay. You take the pills. You and your insurance pay this man thousands of dollars and you consider it all worth it to save your life. You accepted the proper diagnosis and you live!

Paul not only saw himself as a sinner. He saw himself as the worst of sinners, the chief of sinners. At one time he was a proud man, thinking of himself as better than most others. Now he had all his pride stripped away by the Law. He saw his sins and realized how much he needed Christ in his life. Paul had a new song. It was no longer, "I did it my way." It was "Chief of sinners, though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me!" Where there was once despair, there was now new hope, forgiveness and a new life.

Why was Paul converted by God? Why was God so anxious to make a Christian out of this blasphemer and persecutor? Certainly God wanted to save Paul as he wanted to save all sinners. God certainly wanted him to be his great missionary to the Gentiles. But the chief reason for Paul's conversion was that God wanted him to be an example of his grace and forgiveness to all sinners. If God could forgive a man like Paul, then he can forgive a person like me.

This is the truth. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, sinners like Paul, sinners like me, sinners like you. You will never get to heaven by doing it your way, but you will get there by doing it God's way, by trusting in the Savior God sent into this world. That is our hope; that is our confidence. Thank God I didn't do it my way! AMEN.