

How patient can Christ be? How long does He prolong His dealings with people set on self-ruin? It's easy to understand why we quietly concede that some people may never follow Christ. As their story goes on, we have to wonder if God wants us to keep praying for them at all. We may wonder if the case is closed. But if Christ is patiently at work, we can be persistently at work with Him by our prayers.

1 Timothy 1:15a

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance:
 Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...*

1. Recognize Christ's resolve and purpose (vs 15a)

Why does this statement deserve to be affirmed to the fullest measure? Of course it reminds us of the stark reality that people are sinners and need saving. But it also reveals the resolute intensity of Christ's mission. He will indeed save sinners.

- **Read.** Read the statement again, this time out loud with those who are praying with you:
"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."
- **Reflect.** Pause to let the words of this statement sink into your mind and heart afresh. Allow yourself to fully agree with the necessity and the power of Christ coming to save sinners.

1 Timothy 1:15b-16a

¹⁵ *...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.*

2. Ask Christ to show mercy and to extend His amazing patience (vs 16)

How sinful someone may be is not a good question at all except to make one valid comparison: Whoever they may be, they can't possibly be the worst sinner of all. Paul, the person writing this part of the Bible, already claims that distinction. Paul asserts that he was a special case that God used to display "unlimited patience."

- **Ask for many mercies.** When God acts in mercy, He intervenes to bring about changes that we do not deserve. How specific can you be in asking for mercy for the person you are praying for? Ask for breakthroughs of God's hand to come upon them, giving them opportunities to follow Christ and be changed by Him.
- **Praise God for His persistent patience.** One translation of this verse uses the phrase, "perfect patience." Think about the story that has been unfolding in this person's life. Certainly God has already been patient for years. Honor God for His unswerving purpose and unfailing love despite the anguish of watching His long-lost children turn from Him again and again. But despite His longsuffering, He moves quickly with perfect timing. Give God praise for His careful, watchful, steadfast work.

3. Ask Christ to repeat what was exemplified (vs 16)

Paul says that his experience was a display of what Christ desires to do in the lives of many others. You have good grounds to ask God to move in the same way in the life of the person you are praying for. Since Christ showed such mercy and inexhaustible patience before, surely He is willing and able to do so again. Let your prayer follow verse 16, praying specifically that they will believe in Christ and receive eternal life.

This session helps people pray with a prolonged story in view. It's important to learn how to keep on praying despite discouragement that nothing seems to be changing in someone's life. We feel like giving up. It's easy to understand why we quietly concede that perhaps they won't ever follow Christ. As the story goes on, we have to make adjustments to what may be awful behavior. Does God really want us to keep praying? Perhaps the case is closed.

In this time of prayer, focus on the incredible excellency of Christ as a Saviour. He came into the world to save sinners. He's utterly resolute in every person's life to bring them to salvation. He is active in people's lives throughout their days, weeks and years. That doesn't mean that every person will be saved. But it does mean that we can pray assured that Christ will accomplish everything He came to do.

Recognize Christ's resolve.

Talk about why the statement in verse 15 is so deserving of universal affirmation. What is so true about it? Read it aloud as a group. Allow a moment of quiet to let it sink in. Then you can guide participants to focus their prayers on particular people that Christ is pursuing with patience.

Praise for Christ's patience. Pray for Christ's mercy.

Even when dealing with the world's worst sinner, Christ did not give up. You may want to discuss Paul as a sinner for a few minutes. Be careful not to burn too much time in a fruitless discussion comparing one evil to another. The point to focus on is this: that Christ actively, persistently pursues all such people with a patient mercy that is utterly marvelous.

Paul claimed to be the worst sinner ever. Even though he worked quite awhile arranging that entire families of people would be imprisoned or annihilated, it's hard to think of Paul as the world's worst person. Paul was probably referring to how much he may have pushed God's patience to the limit.

Paul describes some aspects of sinful lives in the immediate context of this passage: "...for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers..." (1 Timothy 1:9-10). Paul's description of himself includes some of these things: "...I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man..." (1 Timothy 1:13).

Use discussion about sin as a way to consider the incredible variety in God's acts of mercy in people's lives. Consider what kinds of mercy Christ shows different kinds of sinner. Move the participants to pray in two ways: praising Christ for His patience, and asking Him for His mercies.

Pray for them to believe and receive.

Encourage people to frame their prayer with reference to Paul, perhaps something like this:

"Lord, you were patient with Paul, letting him struggle against you for years, but you finally got to her/him. If you can keep pursuing Paul, I know you can find my friend _____, even though he/she has resisted you for years. Keep pursuing her/him. Move her/him to believe you and receive the gift of life you offer."

By giving this kind of sample prayer, participants will often be better equipped to frame their own prayer.