

[John 8:58:] "Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"

1. The seventeenth century philosopher René Descartes had a famous phrase: *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). Thinking makes us conscious of our existence, or as he said, "We cannot doubt our existence while we doubt." You can thank me later for that little bit of bonus fun to chew on this afternoon. Anyway, the reason I bring this up is that with *I am* statements, we humans need qualifiers: "I am a man ... I am a husband ... I am a father ... I am a pastor ..." (and so on). Even *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) has a qualifier: I am someone who thinks. God needs no qualifiers. He simply is. Only the LORD can be *I Am* without any qualifiers!
2. Nothing keeps people flocking back for more sermons than talking about seventeenth century philosophers, right? Why the philosophy lesson? St. Paul makes an *I am* statement in this reading that sets the tone for the entire reading. What he equates himself with in verse 15 isn't just deserving of full acceptance because it applies only to him. It's deserving of full acceptance because it applies to us all! If there's a "first place" for being a sinner, he was willing to claim it. How about us?
3. Who are you? If we had to fill in the blank to the statement, "I am a _____," is the first thing that pops into our head the word *sinner*? At first that might seem unhealthy. What a way to view ourselves! Imagine you're standing in the line at the grocery store, you strike up a conversation, the person asks you who you are, and you reply, "I'm a sinner." He or she might look at you in a funny way. And the question is, why? Why is this such a hard statement? Why is it seen as unhealthy?
4. The concept of sin, which is missing the mark of perfection, presupposes that we are accountable to someone. That *someone* is Almighty God. That means the measure we are to attain to is set by Him. Perfect is impossible for us. The reason the simple statement *I am a sinner* is so bitter in the mouths of mankind is because it makes me admit I can't do whatever I want. And that hits in a couple of ways. I can't do whatever I want in the sense that what I want might not be the right thing. So the focus is on the *want*. Also, I can't do whatever I want in the sense that I can't make it happen. There the focus is on the *do*. It takes serious spiritual maturity and practice to simply say, "I am a sinner."
5. So we do have that practice. "I confess that I am by nature sinful and that I have disobeyed you in my thoughts, words, and actions." Does that sound familiar? It's in the liturgy. *Liturgy* means service. So are we talking about service to God (like singing and praying)? Or are we talking about God serving us (like the proclamation of His Word and His giving of the sacraments)? The answer is *yes* to both!
6. Who are you? We offer to God—the I AM Who needs no qualifiers—the simple confession: I am a sinner. And as hard as that is to say, as much as the world downplays the truth or runs away from the truth, God places another description on us. Our text will use the word mercy twice. Mercy for sinners means God looking at us, seeing us as we are even when we don't want to admit that's what we are, and choosing to do something about it because of how bad-off we are. The words applied to us in our reading are completely mind-blowing: grace, love, patience, eternal life.

7. God shows grace. That speaks to the reason God acts. He acts because of Who He is. He is love. He acts in love. That means He put us first even though He is first. To the cross we go! The first-place Lord gives His life for me, a first-place sinner who doesn't even want to admit it—and when I have to, try to soften it. This shows His (as our reading will put it) immense patience. Week-in, week-out, I rightly confess my sin with you all. Week-in, week-out God patiently points us to the fact that *the I AM* has given us a new *I am* statement to apply to ourselves: *I am a saint*. The faith He has put into our hearts clings to that identity given by God. The faith He has put in our hearts rejoices in God's goodness. The overflowing of our joyous love to God is matched and only exceeded by the overflowing undeserved love of God for us!
8. It's counterintuitive to our sinful nature and the sinful world, but embracing the truth of *I am a sinner* makes the truth of *I am a saint* so much more powerful in our lives. This is God's doing. It's *liturgy*: His service to us prompted by the truth that we must confess, *I am a sinner*. And we join with Paul to offer *liturgy*: service to Him prompted by the truth of *I am a saint*.
9. So, who are you? You are not *the I AM*. Only God is that. You are a sinner. You are a saint. You are both at the same time. Dear Christian, you belong to God. We hear our text, 1 Timothy 1:12-17. {Read the text.}