

Making Your Ministry about the Gospel

2 Timothy 1:1-18

Ashely came to us as a student. When Ashley and Logan were going to get married, I first learned of Logan's plans to join here. He has interned with us and walked closer with the pastors in preparation to be sent out.

Logan came to us with the desire to be a missionary to China. In his time here, God has developed him theologically, given him the experience of being in a healthy church, and grown him in his understanding of the doctrine of the church. This has created in him a desire to pastor.

So how do you put the two things together—the desire to be a missionary to China and to pastor a local church. You send him to NYC, put him in a church that has a Chinese congregation, located next to a Chinese neighborhood, and in an apartment owned by a Chinese family.

God has prepared you for ministry and the central focus of ministry is the gospel.

From a subterranean prison cell somewhere in the city of Rome bound by chains, awaiting certain execution, the chief preoccupation of Paul's life was the gospel. Why would a great big empire, like the Roman Empire, be so up in arms about an itinerant preacher?

Why? Because the demonic forces energizing the Empire understood the transforming power of message Paul preached, perhaps, better than the church does today.

Paul ended his first letter to Timothy with a call for Timothy to *guard the good deposit entrusted to [him]* (1Tim.6:20). The *deposit* in the Pastoral Epistles is the gospel. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul comes back to that theme, charging Timothy to *guard the gospel* in chapter 1 (14), *to suffer for the gospel* in chapter 2 (3,8-9), *to continue in the gospel* in chapter 3 (13-14), and *to proclaim the gospel* in chapter 4 (1-2).ⁱ

In effect, Paul is saying to Timothy, *Make your ministry about the gospel.*

In 2 Timothy 1 Paul calls for the centrality of the gospel in the church and in the preacher.

For the gospel to be central...

- 1. We must reflect on the power of the gospel in our own lives and the lives of those we know (1:1-5).**

At times we are tempted to think that gospel-centrality will not work. But when I look at my own life and the lives of those in the church, I see firsthand the transformative power of the gospel. Why would I want to move away from the gospel by bringing in some other message to cause transformation in the lives of others?

In Paul and Timothy and Lois and Eunice, we can see the life changing power of the gospel. You cannot help but notice in verses 1 and 2 that everything that has come to Paul and Timothy has Christ at the center. Notice the threefold repetition of Christ: *of Christ Jesus, in Christ Jesus, from Christ Jesus*.

Paul was an *apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus* (1:1). The idea of the phrase, *according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus*, is that the gospel was central to (the goal or purpose of) his apostolic calling.

Paul's life in Christ well illustrates the transforming power of the gospel. In his former life, Paul was a rabbi who excelled in everyway. Because of his disdain for Christ Jesus, he was a blasphemer and a persecutor of the church. On the way to Damascus to persecute the church, Christ Jesus revealed himself to Paul and said, *ego apostello se*, I am sending you (Acts 26:17). With that call by the will of God, the goal and purpose of Paul's life became the promise of life. In that saving, life changing moment, for the first time Paul came in line with the faith of his ancestors—Abraham, Moses, and David (1:3).

Picture Paul in an underground prison cell, chained, cold, hungry, awaiting execution asserting that he is an apostle of life. This picture adds context to verse 10 where Paul says of the historical appearing of Jesus that he *abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel*. Paul's preoccupation was not death but life. This is the power of the gospel that has been given to church.

Timothy's story is so different. He was from nowhere. His father was Greek and his mother Jewish, which means that to that point his religious upbringing was lacking at best. When he was approximately 10 years old, Paul came to Lystra preaching the gospel. Some Jews came from nearby towns and stirred up a mob to drag Paul from the city and stone him, leaving him for dead. In that context, Timothy's Mother, grandmother, and Timothy himself were converted.

A few years later, Paul came back to Lystra and, *a disciple was there named Timothy who was well spoken of by the brethren of Lystra and Iconium* (Acts 16:1,2). From that time, Timothy accompanied Paul.

God made Paul who he was, and he made Timothy who he was. The transformation that took place in both of them came through the gospel. One was raised in the context of a powerful revealed religion with ancestors like Abraham, Moses, and David. The other came up in a seemingly dysfunctional family. What makes the difference is the promise of life in Christ Jesus.

God was at work in the history of the one no less than in the history of the other. When the promise of life in Christ Jesus is preached you cannot write off the intellectual, erudite, elitist nor can you write off the bi-racial kid from a pagan nowhere town. No. You preach the same gospel to both of them. The hope of the one is the hope of the other, and no other hope will either ever have. Make the gospel the central focus of your preaching.

The same faith that was at work in Paul and in Timothy's Mother and Grandmother was at work in Timothy. The evidence was compelling. Center your ministry on the proclamation of the gospel.

In the full knowledge that it is faith in Jesus Christ which powerfully transforms people, Paul calls on Timothy to stir up the gifts in him to carry on gospel work in the power of the Spirit.

2. Develop and use the Spirit's gifting in gospel work in the church (1:6-7).

The tears Paul remembers from Timothy were probably shed when Paul left him in Ephesus (cf 1:15; 2:17). Ephesus was a tough place. As your pastors, we identify with both Paul and Timothy on this point. We walk with you guys, and we get protective of you because we know that sometimes you are going to have to pastor hurt.

Going in Timothy had reservations about his own ability to do the work. Timothy's tendency when the pressure was on was to retreat to the comfort of his natural inclination of hesitancy.

Our tendency in the face of opposition is to retreat and self-protect. We act out of fear, rather than rely on the Spirit and serve in the strength of our spiritual gifting. We rely on our own strength and operate in the weakness of our natural inclinations.

Paul exhorted Timothy, you have genuine faith, so *fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands* (cf. 1Tim.4:14).

Being set apart for ministry is not only a spiritual marker in your life, it is a spiritual marking out in your life. In your ministry operate in the power, love, and self-control that accompanies the right use of your gifting. Fan the flame of your gift—develop it, use it, function in it, and you will get better at it.

You don't need the force of personality, you need the power of a spirit filled life. Love makes us truth tellers. You don't need self-assertion, you need the self-discipline to operate in the power and love of the Spirit. This is like being a quarterback dropping back in the pocket to pass. You see the pocket collapsing around you. Your natural inclination is to roll out to the right or left. It takes self-discipline to step up into the pocket and throw the ball.

Minister in the fullness and gifting of the Holy Spirit.

3. We must never be ashamed of the gospel and be ready to suffer for the gospel (1:8-12).

There is a relationship between shame and suffering. We will never suffer for what we are ashamed of. Paul calls on Timothy not to be ashamed of the gospel nor of those who suffer for it. Rather, we are to share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God (8).

The pastoral task is to center the church on the gospel, so that we might stand together for the gospel in the church and world. We must rally the church to the gospel. And then constantly redirect the church to the gospel.

Our natural inclination is to distance ourselves from those who suffer. In terms of those who suffer because of the gospel, this is the definition of being ashamed of the gospel. Paul will tell of those who abandoned him simply because of his suffering for the gospel (1:15; 2:17; 4:14-16). The irony is, they could not abandon Paul without also abandoning Christ.

This is the point where the conversation gets nuanced. Ever so subtly, those who abandoned Paul began to define the gospel in new ways. To do so, they argued that Paul's imprisonment was proof that the Holy Spirit was not with Paul. Hymenaeus and Philetus were examples (2:17-18). Their novel argument was the resurrection had passed, so if you were living resurrection life you would no longer experience difficulty in this life.

Suffering and imprisonment were sure signs that one did not have the Holy Spirit. Paul's suffering was shameful and showed he did not have the true gospel.

Far from serving in the power of the Spirit being a ticket to an easy life, Paul said, *that is the very reason I am suffering* (11-12). For service to the gospel, Paul was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher. That is, these were the gifts the Spirit gave him for gospel work, and the employment of those gifts were the very reason he suffered. Far from being a reason for shame, Paul knew the Jesus in whom he believed and that Jesus himself is guarding the gospel He entrusted to Paul (12).

What is being said here is very important and has vast implications for the preacher's soul. The gospel that Jesus gave Paul is the gospel that will stand until the final day. It did not die with Paul and will not die with you or me. All forgeries of the gospel will fail (e.g. 2:17). We are not promoting ourselves, but the saving gospel of the LJC. We are not free to edit the gospel, to make it more palatable to the present age, to doubt its sufficiency, to attach anything to it, or take away from it.

We must, however, be clear on what the gospel is if we are going to suffer for it and not be ashamed of it. Paul did not leave open to interpretation what the gospel actually is but is clear on it. All the elements of the gospel are here but it is presented as a person, as a *who* not a *what*. There is no separation in the person of the gospel and content of the gospel. The content of the gospel is what is true of the person of the gospel. Salvation comes not simply in believing certain facts about Jesus, but in receiving the person of Jesus. You can't receive Jesus without, also, receiving what is true of him.

So this gospel on which we stand for which we suffer is a personal encounter with God who saved us, and called us to a holy calling, not based on our works, but because of his own purpose and grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, which is made known now through the coming of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light by this very gospel (9-10).

This is the gospel we must be ready to suffer together for and never be ashamed of. It is a gospel such that when you are chained and awaiting execution will apparently fill you with the firm expectation of life never ending. To move off of that message is the greatest injustice the preacher can do to the church.

4. Follow the pattern and guard the gospel for the sake of the church (1:13-18).

Paul's teaching was a pattern, a model, or an example of *sound teaching*. The gospel does not need improved on in each successive generation. We are to follow the pattern of sound teaching, health giving/life giving teaching, that is found in the apostolic gospel.

Not only must we hold fast the standard of the gospel, we must do so in a certain way—in *the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus*. What we teach is important as well as how we teach it. We are not simply sharing information. We are preaching the Christ whom we have believed. Our preaching must flow from *loving faith* in Christ. We must decide whether we love Christ or the world.

There is no difference between the *sound words* of verse 13 and the *good deposit* of verse 14. As God will uphold the gospel he entrusted to Paul, so it is by the Holy Spirit that Timothy is to guard that same gospel entrusted to him. The preaching that the Spirit empowers is gospel centered. If you will not center your ministry on the gospel, you will resort to gimmickry and cultural relevance, but that will not build a church.

You will never be alone in upholding the gospel. This is God's work in the church and the world. Paul is in effect laying his mantle on Timothy and on us in these verses. Gospel work is what God calls his men to in the full assurance that God will never let the gospel fail. We must proclaim it, defend it, and suffer for it, but realize that God himself will never take his hand off of it.

Conclusion: A charge to the church in application of 2 Timothy 1.

Paul closes this section of text with two powerful examples, one of shame and one of a willingness to suffer. I think this section of text is a word to the church as we set aside young men to send out on the cutting edge of gospel proclamation.

We must never abandon them. Paul first mentions the Asia defection. Given the context, the Asia defection seems to be related to Paul's imprisonment. The idea of *turning away* is the same word Paul uses for turning away from the faith elsewhere in the book (4:4; cf. 2:17). To turn away from Paul meant that they turned from the gospel. Apparently, a movement, perhaps led by the opportunists, Phygelus and Hermongenes, used the imprisonment of Paul to persuade the Asian churches of the need

for a new improved, more relevant, culturally appropriate gospel. These are those who were ashamed of association with Paul and his gospel.

We must walk with them in suffering. On the other hand, there is the example of Onesiphorus, one willing to suffer for the gospel. Timothy was well aware of Onesiphorus's service at Ephesus. Apparently, when Onesiphorus knew of Paul's re-arrest and imprisonment rather than distancing himself from Paul, he was not ashamed of Paul's chains but searched for him in Rome until he found him and, then, cared for him. Far from fear of shame or suffering, Onesiphorus had to walk right up to the officials who would soon have Paul beheaded and say, *I'm here for Paul. Where is he?*

You can hear in Paul's prayer for Onesiphorus and his family the deep comfort they supplied to him in his suffering.

ⁱ Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, 21.