

December 29, 2024

WHEN GOSPEL MINISTRY PRODUCES SUFFERING

2 Timothy 1:6-18

*(2 of 8 in a series through 2 Timothy)*

The first week we looked at this second letter that Paul wrote to Timothy, we considered reality from Paul's perspective. After all, he's the one sitting in a prison awaiting his own execution. And yet he expressed confidence in the life to come, the heritage he received, the truth he proclaimed, and the faith of the one coming after him (i.e. Timothy). But it's also worth considering where all these events left Timothy. What weight would he have been feeling?

Just try to imagine it. Your beloved mentor in the faith, who has been like a father to you, is sitting in prison, ready to be executed. Also, there is likely mounting pressure from professing Christians to distance yourself from Paul. Now, we don't know that certainly, but Paul mentions about one of his imprisonments that some professing believers wanted to "afflict [Paul] in [his] imprisonment" (Phil 1:17). So, it's quite likely that some professing believers are saying that it's Paul's own foolishness that landed him in this position. Maybe they're saying things like, "Paul didn't have to be so rebellious against the governing authorities. He could have been a faithful Christian and refused to be so bold. Look at where it got him. He's simply hot-headed. Christians need to be more measured and self-controlled." So, whether anyone is saying anything specifically to Timothy or not, you can imagine the pressure he might feel to want to put a little distance between himself and his imprisoned mentor.

Therefore, Timothy is not only facing the pain of potentially losing Paul—his mentor and father in the faith—but he's also feeling the pressure to distance himself from him. After all, to imitate or align himself with Paul is likely to put him in a place to incur the same suffering Paul is facing and bring attacks, and again not just from the world but from professing believers. And so Timothy is no doubt feeling the temptation to shrink back and be silent while simultaneously wrestle with his natural sorrow at the thought of losing Paul.

For this reason, after Paul's introduction, he immediately turns to spurring Timothy on to bold, unashamed obedience to the gospel, including a willingness to suffer, if necessary, in order to proclaim and guard the gospel against opposition. It's no doubt the shot in the arm that Timothy needed then, but it's not as if our world is much different. We too see the gospel constantly under attack, see faithful brothers and sisters attacked (even by professing believers), and can no doubt feel tempted to fear and timidity instead of bold, courageous obedience. Therefore, as we look at what Paul tells Timothy, let's hear it as a word of encouragement and exhortation to us as well. Here's what Paul says to Timothy:

**Keep ministering according to God's gifts because you have the Holy Spirit**

This statement is my summary of what Paul is saying in verses 6-7, so let me explain by looking at it in pieces. First, as Paul begins verse 6, it's clear that he's building on what he's just said. He

begins with the words, “For this reason,” which is building off Paul’s previous statement that he is sure that Timothy has the same sincere faith that was present in the lives of his grandmother and mother. And because Paul is confident that Timothy has saving faith, he’s exhorting him to obey the Lord. After all, that’s the responsibility of all believers. Specifically, Paul tells him, “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands” (v. 6).

Now, there is a bit of debate as to what this “gift” is. But most agree that it’s connected to Timothy’s ministry. Maybe it’s a specific gift that enables him to teach or pastor or minister as an evangelist, which Paul will mention later. But regardless of what the specific nature of the gift is, Paul wants Timothy to fan it into flame. The image, of course, is a fire that has burned down to some embers by being neglected, but with a little bit of air it can burst into flame again. And this suggests that Timothy has allowed this gift that the Lord has given him to almost come to nothing. How do we make sense of this?

I think our understanding of this is possible by recognizing one simple reality. Even though the Spirit gifts us for the sake of ministry, if we don’t exercise that gift in ministry, then it can atrophy. It can grow weak and ineffective—like happens when a fire is allowed to burn down without continuing to feed it with more wood and air. Therefore, while it’s encouraging to acknowledge that the Spirit gifts each of us in various ways for ministry, it also comes with responsibility to use the gift faithfully.

But this raises the question, “Why had Timothy not been laboring according to his gift and thus allowing for it to atrophy like a fire that burns down to embers?” The answer seems to be out of fear, timidity, and some cowardice. We don’t know that because Paul identifies that as the reason. We know that because of Paul’s suggested solution to Timothy’s problem. After telling Timothy to fan into flame the gift God had given him through Paul’s laying on of hands (most likely a reference to Timothy’s ordination), Paul says, “For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (v. 7).

So this seems to be the possible situation. Pressure began to mount around Timothy not to continue to labor faithfully in his work of preaching, teaching, and shepherding the saints in Ephesus. Moreover, with many (possibly even professing believers) thinking Paul had acted foolishly in getting himself in prison, pressure mounted not to identify with Paul or imitate him in your own actions. And Timothy, as a young man, started to shrink back and do less. He gave into some timidity and cowardice. He was unwilling to speak the truth boldly or confront those promoting falsehood at some level, perhaps, and so the gift the Lord had given him was weakening.

So Paul’s response to Timothy is to exhort him to get back in the game. Recognize that the Holy Spirit doesn’t come to the believer in order that we might walk in cowardice but in power, love, and self-control. In other words, the Spirit gives us what we need to obey the Lord at all times in all settings. And so Timothy needs to get back at it. And Paul is confident that Timothy can and will do this because he’s confident in Timothy’s sincere faith and that he has the Holy Spirit.

Now, this might be a wakeup call to us as well. Perhaps you and I have never factored in the reality that our gifts can diminish and grow weak without being exercised. So, ask yourself, do you have stories of how the Spirit worked powerfully by provoking you to reach out to someone, giving you an insight or word of encouragement to build up another, give you great faith as you prayed, or the like—and yet all of those stories are in your past? If that’s the case, it’s not sufficient for us to chalk it up to saying, “Well, the Spirit blows where he wills.” Indeed, he gives the gifts, but his sovereign work doesn’t eliminate our responsibility. We’re commended to earnestly desire gifts so that we might minister to others, and we must use our gifts or else they’ll grow weak and diminished—like a fire that’s burned down to embers. So whatever whether it’s timidity or selfishness that’s caused us to shrink back, realize that the Holy Spirit was given to you so that you might walk in love, courage, and self-control. So let’s get back at it, even as Paul tells Timothy, and minister to others with gifts you’ve been given by the Spirit. Second, be unashamed of the gospel and willing to suffer because of the work of Christ.

### **Be unashamed of the gospel and willing to suffer because of the work of Christ**

Of course, the last point raises some questions. If Timothy had shrunk back from ministering according to the gifts the Lord had given him because of the pressure of the culture, what if those around him weren’t bluffing? In other words, what if it actually would cost him to obey Jesus in Ephesus in the first century? What if his opponents would try to limit him from being able to buy goods in the public square, or they would attack him verbally or physically, or what if they would seek to imprison him for his obedience to Christ? Well, Paul has a very clear answer. He writes in verse 8, “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.”

Paul’s answer is not to say to Timothy, “But, listen, if it’s going to really cost you to keep proclaiming the truth and countering lies in your setting, then I get it. Feel free to shrink back.” No, rather, Paul tells him to keep obeying Jesus. Be unashamed of the gospel. And don’t shrink back even from associating himself with Paul. This is what following Christ demands. And Jesus makes it clear up front when he says that if we’re going to come after him it means denying ourselves and taking up our cross. We must remind one another of this.

A story I’ve noted a few times took place in 1553 in Lyons, France. There were five men who’d been imprisoned, awaiting execution for preaching the gospel. They reached out to John Calvin, to see if he might help them get freed. He tried, but ultimately it became clear, he could do no more. So, he wrote them, saying, “[S]ince it appears as though God would use your blood to sign his truth, there is nothing better than for you to prepare yourselves to that end. . . . Even so, my brothers, be confident that you shall be strengthened, according to your need, by the Spirit of our Lord Jesus. . . . Since it pleases him to employ you to the death . . . he will strengthen your hands in the fight, and will not suffer a single drop of your blood to be spent in vain.”<sup>1</sup>

Calvin is confident the Lord will strengthen them for the task, which he repeatedly affirms. But notice how he doesn't suggest that they should shrink away from the gospel in order to spare their lives. Nor does he act as if this is a crazy, unexpected, and an overly demanding position in which the Lord has put them. He simply notes that Christ has the right to "use [their] blood to sign his truth" and "employ [them] to death" in service to him. And the reason Calvin writes that way to these men is because they and he knew that this is what's demanded of any follower of Christ. We must be unashamed of the gospel and willing to suffer for it. That's a reminder we must give to one another.

But is it worth it? Yes. That's what Paul makes clear in verses 9-12a. He writes of God, "who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do."

Paul shows us very clear that it is worth suffering, even to the point of death, for the gospel, because Christ Jesus abolished death and gives life to those of us whom he saves by his grace. In other words, if the gospel is true in telling us that death is gain and life awaits us, then why in the world would we be ashamed of our Lord and shrink back from the suffering that comes with being identified with him and with obeying him? We must not.

But I want to be clear about what awaits us. Historically, believers haven't always been persecuted simply for identifying as Christians. If that were the case, perhaps it'd be easier. Instead, they've been labeled with horrific things in society, like being incestuous or cannibals in the first century, for example. In our day, it's probably not going to be that we feel the pressure to shrink back from declaring the truth and obeying our Lord because people are calling us Christians. It'll probably be that they're calling us bigots for condemning the practice of homosexuality, racists because we deny the tenets and divisions of critical race theory, unloving and belligerent because we won't use pronouns that don't correspond with one's biological sex, or perhaps even radical troublemakers because if we ever claimed that the government has overstepped its sphere of authority in demanding what we must do as a church. And when those things happen, we're not going to be seen as the good guys in society. People line the streets and cheer us on. In fact, it may be that many professing believers even attack us with condemning tweets or in articles. Persecution is rarely attractive, and we shouldn't fantasize about it being so. And yet, we must not be ashamed of the gospel or of obeying our Lord, and we must be willing to suffer for him. After all, his gospel is real and has given us life, and that's why we must say with Paul that we are willing to suffer for it. Third, we can be confident in suffering because we know the Lord will preserve us and the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*. Volume 5. Jules Bonnett, ed. David Constable, Trans. Reprint. (Still Waters Revival Books: Edmonton, AB, Canada, 2000), 404-06.

## **Be confident in suffering because we know the Lord will preserve us and the gospel**

One reason we can confidently serve the Lord, even at the risk of suffering and death, is because we know that the Lord will preserve us and the gospel. I say that because of what Paul says in verse 12b. Now, the verse itself is a little tricky. I'll show you why by reading two different translations. First, the NASB, reads, "But I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard *what I have entrusted to Him until that day.*" But then note that the ESV says, "But I am not ashamed, for . . . I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day *what has been entrusted to me.*"

Do you see the difference? Translators disagree on whether Paul is talking about what he has entrusted to the Lord or what the Lord has entrusted to him. In the first case, Paul would be referencing his soul. That is, Paul would be saying, "I know that the Lord is able to preserve my soul throughout everything that I face, the suffering I go through, and even death until that great day at the resurrection." In the second case, Paul would be referring to the gospel. In that situation, he'd be noting that he's been entrusted with the gospel, and though he's about to die and the gospel is constantly under attack, the Lord will ensure that the gospel is preserved throughout every generation until he returns.

So, which is it? Well, we can't be entirely sure because either could work grammatically, but I tend to side with the ESV on this one and think that Paul is likely referring to the Lord's work in preserving the gospel throughout each generation. But, theologically, both are true, and so I want to stress both of them so that I cover whatever both arguments Paul could have been making here.

One reason we can be confident in the face of suffering and even death is that the enemy will not thwart the gospel, and he cannot destroy our souls. The Lord will preserve both. He is faithful to do that. We can trust that not even death will separate us from him. And we can trust that he'll always raise up faithful believers to continue to preach and guard the gospel. You'll not be ashamed of proclaiming and guarding the gospel on that last day. Therefore, let's just keep pushing forward in faithful obedience to Jesus and in testifying to his gospel, without fear. Our opponents may take our lives, but God will simply bring us home. And the gospel may keep being assaulted, but our Lord will preserve it in every generation. Finally, Paul exhorts Timothy to guard the gospel against opposition because perseverance will be rewarded on the last day.

## **Guard the gospel against opposition because perseverance will be rewarded on the last day**

This is the note that Paul ends on. In verses 13-14, he writes, "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you."

Now when Paul says, "Guard the good deposit," the deposit he's referencing is the gospel. Paul has been a faithful steward of the gospel to this point, proclaiming it and passing it on to others

(such as Timothy) so that it might continue to be heralded. As the one, then, who has received the baton, if you will, Timothy is now told to guard the deposit. And, no doubt, the idea is to defend the gospel against confrontation. In other words, Paul's imprisonment isn't somehow out of line. His suffering in a world that hates Jesus isn't surprising. And attacks on the gospel aren't surprising. And so Paul tells Timothy to guard the gospel against opposition. But he also reminds him of what he should keep in mind as he guards the gospel against its attackers.

In verses 15-18, Paul talks about perseverance. First, he speaks of those who have not persevered. He writes, "You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes." But then he speaks of one who has persevered—Onesiphorus. He writes, "May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived home in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me—may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that day!—and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus" (vv. 16-18).

Now, as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul's words here are reflective of the heart of the Lord himself. In other words, as Paul longs to see Onesiphorus receive mercy and blessing on the day of judgment as he persevered at Paul's side in gospel labors and even identified with Paul in his suffering (no doubt at great risk to himself), Paul calls on the Lord to show him mercy on the day of judgment.

And in one sense, you could think that this has nothing to do with Timothy. After all, Paul is simply praising Onesiphorus. But I think Paul writes this for Timothy's sake. I believe he's holding up Onesiphorus as an example of one who persevered well and will receive blessing. In fact, it may be that Onesiphorus has already gone to be with the Lord. Notice how Paul asks for mercy to be shown to the "household of Onesiphorus" and then speaks of all that Onesiphorus himself did for him. Paul may be speaking this way because Onesiphorus has died, and all that is left is his household. Paul, then, asks for God to show them mercy for Onesiphorus's service. If that is the case, the example is even stronger. Here's one that has finished the race, fought the good fight, and kept the faith, and he will indeed receive reward from the Lord on that day. And Paul holds him up to Timothy so that he might say, "Do likewise." Guard the gospel against all attackers because your perseverance will be rewarded on the day of judgment.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Jesus himself urged his followers at Smyrna to be faithful unto death. Our Lord pulls no punches when he commands us to follow him. He tells us to come, follow him, and be willing to suffer and die. What this means is that we need to keep ministering according to the gifts the Spirit has given us, be unashamed and willing to suffer for the gospel, and guard it against all attackers. But we can do this knowing that the Lord will preserve us and his gospel no matter what comes and that as we persevere, we will find reward on that great day. We have a model in the one who was obedient to the point of death and endured the shame for the joy set before him. Let's remember his sacrifice for us now as we come to the table. Amen.