

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

APRIL 13, 2008



For more sermons go to www.wrconchurch.org

1 Timothy 1:1-20 *"I Am The Worst"*

What would you tell a young man to help direct his life if you were an older man who knew he didn't have much time left? Paul is imprisoned in Rome, probably for the second and last time before his execution in the mid-60s AD during the emperor Nero's purges of the Christians. He is still actively preaching the Gospel of his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, but he is also concerned for the churches he helped establish, and in these his last letters, for their young leaders like Timothy and Titus. Will they be strong? Will they keep a firm hold on the Gospel, and on their own lives? How will they deal with the problems and dissent that come up in every church, or any assembly of people? What would you say to a Timothy, probably only in his 20s or 30s, to encourage and direct him?

Paul does something few of us would dare to do: he not only offers instruction and encouragement, but he offers himself as an example for Timothy to follow. That will not be easy, because their backgrounds, personalities, ages, Christian experiences and gifts are very different. Paul was a Pharisee converted to faith in Jesus by a dramatic encounter on the Damascus road; Timothy was a Gentile raised by a Christian mother and grandmother. Paul was an aggressive, highly verbal, spiky character possessed of a great mind, who had suffered a lot for his faith over the years; Timothy was apparently a much meeker character who needed

strengthening - indeed his very name suggests "fearful."

Paul was an itinerant preacher who spent no more than 2-3 years in any one church, and had probably (according to 2nd century historians) traveled as far west as Spain with the Gospel. Timothy had been his companion on several trips - they became close enough for Paul to call him his "son in the faith" - but Timothy was now settled as the leader of the church in the major city of Ephesus, famous for its huge Greek temple of the moon goddess Artemis, as magnificent as the Parthenon in Athens, and one of the "Seven Wonders" of the ancient world. How can a 30 year-old handle being the overseer of the Christian church in such a place?

1) Belief and Behavior

Paul is predictably anxious that Timothy will maintain his faith and the true Gospel against all the pagan and semi-Gnostic beliefs of the region. So Paul's instructions are often: "stand firm," "stay and teach," "restrain those who are teaching falsehood." Paul is certain from his own experience that there is a direct link between what people believe and how they behave. Truth matters; believe a lie about God or about yourself, and sooner or later it will show itself in devastating ways in your life. As an example, he offers two men named Hymenaeus and Alexander, whose loss of

faith in Christ has led them to “shipwreck” – as graphic an image as you can wish for people of the Mediterranean area. In our culture, we might paraphrase Paul as saying as a “get your head straight or you are a car-wreck waiting to happen!” And what applies to Timothy applies even more to his church.

What should Timothy do? Restrain the people who are causing dissent in the church. Some of them are teaching false ideas – some mixture of Jewish/Christian asceticism and pseudo-Gnostic beliefs, “myths and genealogies.” They produce nothing more than “endless chatter” and controversy, which, says Paul, does not advance the work of the Gospel. It’s a warning that has had to be sounded a thousand times since then, and still today. Do not waste your time, and your church’s time, on endless debates and speculations on things of little importance to the work of God. By all means make sure that you agree on the foundations of the faith, but do not waste everyone’s time endlessly going over old debates and side-issues! They are disruptive, they are red-herrings, they are too often a means of evading the plain commands of the Gospel.

Beware especially, says Paul, of people who do not know what they are talking about. Be sure you yourself know enough to know when *not* to get into arguments with people who are best ignored! If that sounds like Paul talking, it is! Paul is not a man to be distracted from his task, he has no time for fools and knaves, he recognizes rubbish when he sees it. He was not, I think we would all agree, an easy man to work with or to have as a leader. Perhaps this is why God in his Providence made him an itinerant evangelist, and not the bishop, pastor, or elder of a settled church! Timothy is perhaps the better personality for that job, but he cannot be so accommodating that he never

stands up to trouble-makers and to people who delight in stirring up controversy.

Paul knows that failing to defend the faith means it will be diluted to the point where it has no power in people’s lives, and “shipwrecks” will surely follow. Despite all the *diversity* that modern minds find so fascinating in the beliefs in the first few Christian centuries, Paul is convinced that there is a *core of “sound doctrine”* that emerged from the Apostolic community which must be preserved, defended, and handed on to the next generation. Failing to do that will mean the gradual loss of the faith, with disastrous consequences. We should no doubt remember that in our and every generation.

So Paul wants Timothy to promote *sound doctrine* and *sincere faith*, which will lead to *good consciences, pure hearts, and love*. The goal, he says, is love - right behavior between people – and the path to that is the true Gospel which renews hearts and consciences, and delivers people from guilt and depraved lives.

2) *Christ Came For Sinners*

Where does Paul get this certainty? From his own experience. He is ready to use himself as example – not because of *what he now does*, but because of *what he is*: a redeemed sinner. In a typically parenthetical paragraph – you always have to be careful reading Paul not to miss his main point in his dense syntax and dependent clauses! – Paul says he was once a disbeliever in this Jesus and a rabid persecutor of his church. He was an aggressive and violent man who thought nothing of dragging men, women and children out of their homes and having them thrown into jail, flogged or stoned. He was a man of sufficient stature in the Jewish leadership – he had even studied under the great Rabban Gamaliel – that he could get

letters of extradition from the High Priest to roust out Christians from as far away as Damascus in the province of Syria.

But in all this, he had been *wrong*. He had been ignorant of the truth; he had disbelieved all that was claimed about Jesus until the day near Damascus when he was knocked off his horse and blinded by the light and interrogated by the Risen Lord: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus... now get up and do what you are told." After three days of blindness, a Damascan Christian named Ananias is sent to lay hands on him, and Saul receives the gift of the Holy Spirit and is baptized as a Christian.

30 years later, Paul (as he now is) understands what happened to him: he had been a blasphemer against God, denying that God was at work in Jesus, until God in his grace and mercy had knocked Paul off his horse and shown him the truth. "I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief; the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with faith and love in Christ Jesus." And his experience was an example to the world of one central truth, that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." That is what Paul has fought for in 30 years of ministry; that is what he insists Timothy should "fight the good fight" for - to proclaim that there is no one, including a Saul, who is beyond the reach of the grace and mercy of God, shown in Jesus.

"Christ came to save sinners... of whom I am the worst." Not, please note, "I was the worst;" but "I am the worst." Paul knows that within him lurk the same sins of unbelief and rebellion against God and his law (see for example, *Romans 7*); but he knows that he is now and ever will be a forgiven sinner, a *redeemed sinner*, an unworthy man on whom the grace and

mercy of God have been poured out "superabundantly" - Paul even has to coin a new Greek word here to make his point! And that grace has changed his life. He now has the confidence that comes from knowing that he is loved, forgiven, called, commissioned. He can now call when he needs to on his "apostolic authority" - that he too was one of the band that met the Risen Jesus in the 30s AD, and ever since he has been a man with a mission.

3) Fight The Good Fight

So for Timothy, here is a lesson from an old man: if God can redeem and use me, he can redeem and use anyone! Do not be afraid of those who oppose the Gospel of Jesus Christ; I am here to tell you that it is the truth, and I have lived with its consequences these 30 years and will until I die. Do not be timid, young Timothy; be strong in the faith, and trust the Lord who saved me to save you and all those who you preach the Gospel to.

Because everybody is lost, but *nobody is too lost*. The shepherd will find them and bring them back rejoicing. Don't forget that, and don't waste your time on issues or people who would gladly distract you from that message. Remember the "superabundance" of the grace of our Lord and Savior, and focus your ministry on that.

Paul is *testifying*. Brilliant mind that he is, greatest of the early theologians though he has become, he time and again goes back to that formative encounter of his life, and testifies that Jesus changed him. That, he believes, can strengthen Timothy in his calling. The younger second-generation Christian may not have had the same experiences, but he can draw on what God has done in Paul.

What would you say to Timothy if you were Paul? Teach, work, instruct... yes; but also

“remember what Jesus Christ came to do, and what he has done in me... because I am an example of the patience and the goodness of God, who can call the worst of sinners into his family.” This is *the power of personal testimony*. It is something that has often been derided, and still invites the half-smile, the ironic “well that’s what you would say, wouldn’t you..?” After all, there’s no-one so certain as the true convert...

But thoughtful people are beginning to realize once again that what is embodied in the lives of real people is at least as persuasive as a claim to “know the truth.” Each has its place in the work and life of the church, just as it has in personal life, in child-rearing, or any form of character or skills training. There are certain things you need to know; *truths you need to embrace*; but there is also great power to be had from observing *the life experiences of other people*.

And that means that every one of us who has been touched by the “superabundant” grace of Jesus Christ has two callings: to speak the truth that we have learned, and to live our lives as examples of transforming grace. We each have a story to tell of how God has worked in us in the past, and how he is still at work in us, as well as a “back story” of what this means. So here is a trustworthy saying: “*Christ came into this world to save sinners,*” but also “*take as an example, me.*”

Let us pray...