

October 23, 2016

A LETTER TO A YOUNG MINISTER

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2 Timothy 3.10-4.8

The letter we know as 2 Timothy was written by an elderly minister,
possibly the apostle Paul,
to a young minister who was having problems.
Problems, you see, were part of the Christian ministry from its earliest days,
and not much has changed in that regard.

The first centuries of Christianity were a confusing time.
People all over the Roman empire came to faith in Christ
through the work of the apostles and their followers.
We don't know much about the work of the other apostles,
but we know quite a bit about the work of the apostle Paul.
Much of the New Testament is composed of his letters
and the book of Acts tells the story of his missionary journeys
From Acts we know that Paul seldom stayed very long in any church he founded;
he moved on to preach the gospel to those who had not heard.
So these new Christians were more or less left on their own.
Some of them were Jewish and knew the Hebrew Bible,
but most of them were Gentiles converted from paganism.
Can you imagine the problems they faced?
They trusted in Jesus, but their thinking was still rooted in their pagan background.
So very diverse ideas about Jesus and salvation and a Christian life
were probably floating around in every young Christian church.
They certainly were in the church in Corinth;
read 1 Corinthians and you'll realize what problems Paul dealt with there!
And Timothy was called to be the minister of one of these young churches.
He undoubtedly needed help and advice, and probably welcomed it.

Our passage this morning is only a small part of the letter he received,
but it focuses on a very important part of his task:
in the midst of many divergent and conflicting ideas,
how is he to help his people understand the true gospel of Jesus Christ?
Paul's answer is very clear: go back to basics!
Timothy's mother and grandmother were Jewish Christians,
and from his childhood they had taught Timothy their sacred writings,
the books of the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament,
which, Paul says,
"are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

In other words, Timothy was blessed with a good theological education,
learned not in a seminary, but at his mother's knee.

And that had been honed by the time that he had spent with Paul,
watching Paul work and listening to Paul preach.

That was the foundation on which Timothy was to build,
and that was a solid foundation.

Those sacred writings in which he had been instructed were God-breathed.

They were the story of God's faithfulness to his covenant with Israel,
and they were also the message of God's coming servant, the Anointed One,
known in Hebrew as the Messiah and in Greek as the Christ,

They were the promise which was fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth,
the Son of God, the promised Messiah, the Saviour of the world.

In those days before the New Testament was established,
the Old Testament provided the solid foundation Timothy needed.

Why was the Old Testament such a solid foundation?

Why did God give us the written record of God's gracious dealings
with the people of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?

Because it is useful! That's what Paul says.

The history of God's dealing with the people of Israel is useful.

The messages of the prophets who spoke in God's name are useful.

The Psalms that reflect the relationship of God and God's people are useful.

Useful for what?

For teaching,

for reproof,

for correction,

for instruction in righteousness,

so that the people of God may be trained and equipped for every good work.

So that the people of God may be trained and equipped

to be more like their Master, the one whose name they bear.

Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God who died to be the Saviour of the world,
is also the picture of what God intends human beings to be.

In Jesus Christ we see God in human form,

showing us in word and deed the kind of people God made us to be.

God wants all people to be followers of the Way,

the Way made visible in Jesus Christ.

Not in the details of his life-

God does not want us to try to live as first-century Jews, as Jesus did.

No, it is in the purpose of Jesus' life:

to live in perfect obedience to God his Father,
to reflect the amazing love of God to all people,
to express in his life the loving power and loving righteousness of God.

Jesus was trained and equipped for every good work,
and that is what God wants for all God's people.

That is why Paul urges Timothy, in the strongest possible words,
to proclaim the message of God's grace in Jesus Christ
in all times and in all places,
in good times or in bad,

whether people are open to the message or resistant.

That is what Timothy, as a minister of the gospel, is called to do -
to proclaim the message of amazing grace,
to carry out his ministry faithfully under all circumstances.

That was Timothy's job,
and that continues to be the job of every minister of the gospel.

The times in which we live are difficult times,
much like the times in which Timothy lived.

We live in a culture which denies or ignores Christ,
or tries to use Christ for its own purposes.

We live at the end of 1500 years of Christendom,
years in which the Christian church has had a privileged place
because it was the church of the empire, the ruling power.

Sometimes it was the conscience of the empire,
but too often it was the empire's tool.

Thank God those days are over!

Today we are moving to a whole new way of understanding the world,
a change every bit as great as the change from the medieval to the modern world.

We don't really have any idea yet what that new world will be like,
but we are in the midst of great and basic change.

And transition times are always difficult times.

So today, these words directed to Timothy, speak directly to every minister of the gospel.
In these days it is imperative that we proclaim the gospel message
without fear or favour.

It is imperative that our ministry is built on the solid foundation
of God-inspired Scripture.

And it is imperative that the goal of our ministry
is that the people of God may be trained and equipped
to follow the way of their Master, Jesus Christ.

Let's try to put that in perspective.
We ministers like to be liked.
We're human beings, and like everyone else
we want to be accepted and appreciated.

But...and this is a big But...

We cannot modify our message to make you like us better!
Please try to understand that.

We cannot modify our message to make you like us better!

Sometimes we'll try to simplify the message to be sure all can understand.
Sometimes we may have to deal with concepts that you find difficult.
When we do, we'll try to meet you where you are.
Actually, we do this all the time.

For example, if this were 1916 instead of 2016,
you'd probably come to worship expecting a 45 minute sermon,
and even feel cheated if it only lasted 30 minutes.

But times have changed, and we have changed.
Living as we do in a world of sound bites,
we have trouble listening for long periods of time.

That's why this sermon won't be more than about 15 minutes.

But still -

We cannot modify our message to make you like us better!

So, my dear friends, while this is a text and a sermon about ministers,
I hope you realize that it speaks to every one of us,
and I can say "us" because I spend a lot of Sundays sitting in the pews.

I hope this sermon makes you think about why you come to worship.

Don't come here to be entertained.

Don't come here to have your ideas supported and confirmed.

Come here with a heart that is open to hear the Word of God,
even if the message is something you'd rather not hear!

Come here to receive the message of God's amazing grace,
and then, by the power of the Holy Spirit working in you,
go out to translate that message into lives that reflect God's love and grace
in a world that desperately needs that message.