

Guard the Deposit

2 Timothy

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Bible Text: 2 Timothy 1

Preached on: Sunday, March 10, 2013

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If you're using the church Bible turn to page 995. 2 Timothy, chapter 1. We're breaking into verse 12. The Apostle has just been saying that he is in prison, he is suffering because he's an preacher, an Apostle, a teacher. Verse 12, "But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. 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. You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes. 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 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."

So Paul is suffering for the gospel but he is unashamed because he's already explained that suffering is tied to the gospel, it goes with the territory. Paul is isolated, he feels rejected by others but he is unashamed. "I am not ashamed," he says. Paul has heard bad news of defections and decline in some of the churches. But he is unashamed. "I am not ashamed."

Timothy, on the other hand, is in danger of being ashamed since Paul has already exhorted him to not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel. He is in danger of dropping the ball of the gospel that's been thrown to him by the Apostle. He's fumbling with it at the moment. He is wobbling, he is losing his foothold, he is in danger. I don't think you can read these opening words of this letter without realizing that this young minister who has shown so much promise, when you read the first letter, is in a dangerous spot. And apparently it is to do with suffering, it's to do with the pain or with the specter of pain and death that are inhibiting his gospel testimony. And at one level, you can't blame him.

Not everybody is wired to take risks. There are natural risk takers who are pioneers, the innovators, the entrepreneurs, the inventors. It takes being a risk taker in many ways to put yourself in harm's way either on the battlefield or behind the scenes in secret work, in order to secure the safety of the rest of us. But be sure of this, that even with risk takers, it is not that these people have no fear, it is rather that they have their fear under control.

They have mastered their fear and they're channeling the energies that fear arises within us, channeling them into positive action.

Paul has argued, if you look back to verse 7, that we have not been given a spirit of fear. The Holy Spirit has not given us a spirit of fear, rather the Holy Spirit has given to all of us believers, all of us, a spirit of power and love and self-control. And now Paul is going to illustrate that, he's going to model it. He's going to show us what love and power and self-control look like when they're clothed around a human person himself. He's going to illustrate it negatively by way of contrast and positively by way of comparison. And the underlying presupposition of the text is this, that to live for Christ and to speak for Christ in the world has never been and never will be easy. It will never be natural especially because we find ourselves surrounded by error and evil on every hand, always. He is talking to the whole Christian era as well as to this Christian man. And as he talks to this man, he wants to put the gospel up front and center and in this passage I think we've read today, he wants to say to this man and to us three things. He wants to say believe the gospel, guard the gospel and serve the gospel.

First of all, he wants to say, believe the gospel. He knows that by giving his own testimony. And we've already sung something of his testimony in the hymn we just sung a moment or two ago. He says, "I'm suffering, but I am not ashamed for..." Here's why. "I know whom I have believed." And here he is suffering for God and we would expect him, perhaps, to be jaded, to feel frustrated at the lack of progress. We might feel that he would be discouraged because of people defecting or churches declining or the prospect of his own dying now that he's on death row.

We might have expected him to be worried that this Christian movement, so young, so fragile, might disappear once the last Apostle is off the scene. But do you know what he's saying here? Look at what he's saying. He says, "I know whom I have believed. This is why I'm not ashamed. I know who I believe." He's saying two things, that he knows God and he believes God. He knows whom he believes. He has understanding of who God is and he has cast himself utterly and only and always upon this God whom he knows. "I know whom I have believed." He's believed the gospel and when you believe the gospel, you believe God. You believed what God's says. You believed that God's word is his bond. You are trusting the person behind the promise that is contained in the gospel. "I know," he says. "I am convinced," that's the language he uses, "I am persuaded. I am certain." What is he certain of? He is certain that God is able to guard. God is able to protect and preserve and keep what has been deposited with him. God is able to do that.

Now, here's the big question. You come to this text and the big question is, What does Paul mean by my deposit? That's, by the way, the word he uses, the same word as he'll use to Timothy in a moment. "I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day." What has been deposited? Either with me or with him. You'll see that in the footnote of your English Standard Version. So which is it? Here's the question. And the scholars bat us back and forth, it's either what God has given to Paul, the deposit which we'll see in a moment is the gospel or it's what Paul has given to God, that is, his life, himself. And you can see how it is that we can swing either way when it comes to looking at the text. I

mean, the immediate context is the transmission of the gospel. That's what he's going on to say to Timothy and he'll say more about that in chapter 2. It's the transmitting of the gospel from one generation to the other as you throw the ball of the gospel to the next person to catch and keep.

On the other hand, if you look at the context, he calls it "my deposit," in this case. Which sounds like something he has made with God. He has put himself, his life, as it were, in God's hands. He has entrusted it to God. So, which is it? And does it matter? Well, you've got to work that out for yourself. When I was at seminary, we were told never, ever do that. Never leave it up to the congregation to decide. Always tell them an answer. So, here's my take on this. I really think we can go either way with this and I can line up a great line like a beauty contest or a talent contest, maybe. I don't know that John Calvin is all that beautiful. But if you had a whole line of people that you could put on one side and a whole line of people on the other and you'd be impressed by the names on both sides. And we've got to decide this morning here at Tenth Presbyterian Church, we've got to decide which one. Here's my decision. Ok. We don't have to choose. I'm not always in the middle, but I am in this.

Listen to this, here's the issue, Paul has just told us, what? He has just told us that he has risked everything and has committed everything that he is, he has given everything that he is to God. "I know, I know," he says, "whom I have believed. I am persuaded and I know whom I have believed." He has risked all on God, given all to God, cast himself utterly upon God. He's told us that.

And how does he know about God? How do you do that? How you do that is, you hear the good news of the gospel. The good news of the gospel is believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you'll be safe and saved. Safe and saved. The good news of the gospel is that when you cast yourself utterly upon this God who is revealed in the gospel, there is your security, your refuge, your place of safety forevermore. Here is why it doesn't matter. Whether it is he is saying, "the gospel that God gave to me and trusted to me to be a preacher of, that gospel is safe and secure because it's God's gospel. And no matter what the world does to it, no matter how much the world attacks it, no matter how much the world is against it, God is ensuring that that good news message is absolutely secure for the generations to come. That good news message will not be lost. Therein lies my security because I believe the gospel and I believe in the God of the gospel. And if God's keeping the gospel safe, then you can be sure the promises that are in the gospel are absolutely safe, too." It works the other way as well. "Because I believe the gospel, because I've trusted myself to the gospel promise, I am sure that my entire life, who I am, what I am, my tomorrows are safe, they are safe with Christ and God. Beyond the reach of harm."

You don't have to choose because ultimately whether it's the gospel that's safe, you are safe in the gospel. And if it's you that's safe, you can be sure that the gospel that brought you salvation is safe in God's hands, too. So, either way, it's good news for the gospel and it's good news for you. It's good news for the gospel because it is never an endangered species. Remember Mark Twain, some of you look as if you do remember

Mark Twain. He is reputed to have said after reading his own obituary, "The reports of my demise have been greatly exaggerated."

And the end of Christianity has been trumpeted from the beginning of Christianity. Here we have the Apostle Paul and he's describing these defections and so-on that are going on and people probably imagined that once the Apostles were dead, those men who were the eye witnesses and ear witnesses of the risen Lord Jesus, that would be the end of this nascent Christian movement. And when Diocletian launched his assault on Christians, people might have thought that systematic persecution by the Romans would have meant the end of Christianity. And when during those long years of the Middle Ages, the high Middle Ages, the gospel was eviscerated of its core message, as it were, it's evangelical dynamism was lost for that period, known only in the hearts of individuals who believed what they were hearing in their church services. You might've wondered whether the gospel was lost. And in the era of the Reformation with the bannings and the burnings that went on in the period, you might've thought this is the end of the gospel, it's going to be lost. Then in the era of rationalism and evolutionism and atheism. Currently, secularism. You may throw up your hands in horror and say, "The gospel will be lost." I think what Paul is saying here is, "It's good news for the gospel. It will never die." Rome came and went. The Middle Ages and the medieval church came and went. The Reformation came and stayed. Rationalism and evolutionism and atheism and secularism are already in the processes of becoming undone if only you read the literature. Our Western society which has rejected Christianity and its own history in doing so and is trying to purge, as it were, from memory all traces of that former influence is well down the road towards its own disintegration and becoming a footnote in the pages of history.

But the church and the gospel survives. It will survive the seminary professors who no longer think it credible. It will survive the pessimistic pastors who no longer think it culturally cool. It will survive the popular media who've declared it passé. It will survive and not only is it safe, not only is the gospel safe but the people who believe the gospel are safe in God's hands. "No one," says Jesus, "no one will pluck you out of my Father's hands." Notice how long is it safe? How long are we safe? It says, "Until that day." Until that day at the end of history. Until that day of reckoning and reconciliation. Until that day when the skies will tear open like a scroll and Jesus will descend in all his power and glory. That day towards which all history is headed. Until that day, that final day of vindication and justification for both the gospel and for your faith in the gospel. Until that day it is safe and secure beyond the reach of harm.

Paul is writing to Timothy and is saying, "Please, Timothy, don't panic. Don't despair of the gospel's truthfulness and it's ability to last. Don't think for a moment that your trust in it will prove an illusion. The gospel is safe. His people are safe. My name from the palms of his hands, eternity will not erase. Engraved on his heart, it remains in marks of indelible grace." The gospel is safe.

And Paul's confidence in the gospel's security lies in his faith in the God of the gospel. "I know in whom I have believed." That's where he puts his faith, in the God of the gospel. If you put his faith against his circumstances, his emotions would be rising and falling up

and down as circumstances were once afore him and then against him and so on. Whether people liked his preaching or didn't like his preaching. Whether people were responsive or not responsive. Whether he was shown hospitality or shown hostility. Whether he's in the palace bearing witness or struggling to survive in the prison. But his confidence didn't lie in this circumstances, it lay in knowing the God of the gospel.

You see, suddenly the difference between a great Apostle and you and me disappears because you and I can have the same confidence he had. "Not ashamed. I am persuaded that I know in whom I have believed." Believe the gospel.

Secondly, he says this particularly to Timothy, he says, "Guard the gospel. Follow." He says two things, two commands. "Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me. Guard the good deposit entrusted to you." Here's the task that he's laying down on Timothy. First of all, follow the pattern of sound words. Let's take that backwards. He's talking about the gospel here. He's talking about the revelation that he has given to the church and that we have in our New Testament and he says that they consist of sound words. That's the way that used to be, about 100 years ago, so I'm told, the way in which we talked about people being sound in mind and body. I have to say that went over your heads. But that's the way in which it's used. In other words, it means healthy. You can see that from the footnote, by the way, it's there just so you know. It means healthy, which means that this good news message is good for you. It's good for you. It's not diseased or maimed or corrupted. It doesn't just make you feel better. No, this message of the gospel is actually so good for you it makes you better. It makes you better.

You may not be a Christian and frankly you're confused, you feel confused or perhaps you've already made up your mind what you think about Christianity and you're listening to this and perhaps you're on the fringes of Christianity, you've talked about his all until you're blue in the face, into the small hours of the morning and you've discussed it and talked and still you don't see it. They see it, you don't see it. Can I tell you this, this message is so powerful it can make even you see it. Not all of us saw it, you see. Not all of us grew up seeing it. For some of us in this room, there was that time, that period, sometimes it took a long protracted period of time. For others it was a kind of instantaneous bolt from the blue, as it were, crashing in upon our consciousness when suddenly we began to get things in focus. If it was happening slowly or just suddenly it was like a light went on in our brains and suddenly it made sense because as you exposed yourselves to the word of God, as you exposed yourself to the gospel of Jesus Christ, it actually does the stuff. It does what it says on the packet. It actually is the creative word of God. It makes things happen. People see who couldn't see it before. People who are dead to God without any affections for him or any desire for him, are made alive by the very word of the gospel. It does things. It accomplishes whatever it's sent to do. And it brings health into people's lives because those words, you see, are true words, they are correct words. And they do the stuff.

And you notice there is a pattern to these words. Like an architect's drawing, there is a pattern. Moses, you will remember, when he's building the Tabernacle is told to follow the pattern given by God. In other words, there's only one gospel. That message is

delivered in specific words that communicate precisely what we are intended to know. Timothy has been given a faithful account of the gospel message and he is to follow it, he is to preserve it, he is to hold to it, he is to treasure it. Treasure those words because good teaching leads to good spiritual health. And you know there are many Christians who suffer from lack of this and they present with all kinds of spiritual ailments. Super supped up piety that is so realistic for example, or pride or anger or emotionalism or intellectualism or legalism, all kinds of extremes. These are all presenting problems in the lives of believers.

And they all stem from lack of those healthy words, those sound words. In some places, these sound words have been neglected. People no longer know the Bible or understand the Bible or get to grips with the Bible. The enemy is within. In some places, the Bible has been replaced by other things in evangelical churches. Entertainment, for example. We have a great musical program here at this church but in many churches the music becomes a diversion from the preaching of the word of God. Or it's elevated to the same status as the word of God. In other churches, there's a lack of application of the word of God or an obsession with things that are secondary.

The other thing that he says about this word is that it is a good deposit. It's a good deposit that needs to be preserved and maintained. The word "good" there means beautiful, it's a beautiful message this gospel message. And Timothy is told to guard it. That is, guard it in such a way that something is not lost or damaged. Paul is saying to Timothy, "Now, look, God is able to keep it and keep you. But you have a responsibility. I've thrown you the ball of the gospel. But you're kind of fumbling with it at the moment. Don't drop the ball. Don't do it. Don't let it happen. Guard it. You've got it while you have it until that day when God takes it out of your hands and gives it to somebody else. While you're still alive and breathing and have a pulse, guard, don't let people play with it. Don't them much around with it. Don't let them decide that phrases like "the Son of God" are offensive to somebody and we take it out. Don't let the world decide that Christian morality doesn't please them, take that out. I mean, how far are we prepared to go? To play around with a pattern of sound words in the gospel. Guard it.

And what that means for us as individuals and for our churches, we don't need to reinvent the gospel every Sunday to meet every new challenge from the world culture that emerges all around us. The gospel has always been, always been..I mean, people think there was a day in history somewhere people were just gagging for the gospel. That never happened. It never happened. It's an illusion. It's always been countercultural, counterintuitive, it's always aroused hostility. Yes, there were times when, in a sense, officially the gospel was the message to the country or whatever recognized but don't think for one moment that in the hearts of people there was not hostility to the gospel because there was. And even when everybody was going to church, don't think for one moment the majority actually believed the gospel or were not hostile to the gospel because they were. At least we're in a more honest day today. We're in a more honest day today where if you're going to be a believer, you're going to stand out from the crowd and that's what you're called to do and to guard the gospel.

The third thing he says here, is serve the gospel. And serving the gospel, that's, I think, the emphasis is that if you look down at verse 18, he actually uses that word when he talks about this man, Onesiphorus. But he wants to alert Timothy and us to these realities. 1. That serving the gospel will bring disappointments. He's just said, follow and guard the gospel but not everybody is doing that. And you notice the Apostle's concern is not academic here, it's not kind of up there in the clouds or in the atmosphere. He could actually point to case studies to people who once held to the gospel and had turned away from it.

You see, when he was writing to Timothy in his first letter, in chapter 4 of 1 Timothy he had reminded Timothy that we're living in the last days. He was living in the last days, we are living in the last day. The writer to the Hebrews says, "God has in these last days spoken to us by his Son." And the coming of Jesus initiated the last days. And one of the hallmarks of these last days, whenever you look at that expression in the Bible, you will discover one of the hallmarks of this age is this, that there will be false teaching and apostasy. Both of those are just part of the territory of living in the last days. So Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy, 4:1, "The Spirit expressly says that in the last times," in the last or later times, the last days, "some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons." It's just the way it's going to be.

So, when you see people defecting, don't throw your hands up and holler. It's going to happen. And when you hear people teaching false teaching, don't be surprised. That's what it means to be in the last days. In other words, if you go back to the time of the Hebrews in the early days when Israel is the people of God and they're moving into the promised land and they have hostile enemies all around them, attacking them physically all the time. Here's the Israel of God today, out there in the world, this time we're heading towards Canaan, the New Jerusalem and now the enemies are not so much physical enemies armed with swords and guns and whatever, our enemies are armed with false teaching.

That's how they're attacking the church today. With false doctrine all the time and says the Apostle, "Not only that but people are capitulating. You're aware," he says, "that all who are in Asia turned away from me among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes." Acts 19 says, "All the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord and many believed." Now, Paul says, "They've all gone." I mean, maybe he's exaggerating, maybe that's just how it felt to him, but there's no doubt that there has been a massive, a massive defection from the gospel. And that must have been an enormous loss to the Apostle Paul to hear that news. A falling away. Because it's in the human heart to defect especially when the going gets tough. We have a saying, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." But also when the going gets tough, the others start running. And that's just the way it is.

So, when we discover, for example, you will discover this if you aren't yet a Christian and you're toying with the idea, let me just be honest with you, you will find that once you take that final step and you declare yourself, "I am for Jesus," that is not going to go down well. It's not politically correct to say that today. It will cost to take a stand for truth. And the verb that's used here is used for people who turn away from hearing the

truth. They've turned away from the truth of the gospel. Paul says to Timothy and to us, "Don't be surprised when the church disappoints you." Christ has many fair-weather friends who are all for him when he's popular but as soon as he becomes unpopular, as soon as there is a cost to be paid, are ready to parachute out.

What has this defection looked like? Well, I've said sometimes that it looks like modifying the gospel so it's less offensive. There are the advocates of appeasement, don't confront the enemy, don't annoy the enemy, don't say anything the enemy doesn't like, subtract out of the message anything that is irritating, anything that they constantly bring up that causes a stumbling block to peace. And I want to say there is actually no way you can take this seriously and say that there's room for compromise when it comes to the gospel. The world is no friend to biblical Christianity and the more you give it, the more it will want. The more it will want. The more you say, "Well, you know, we know that offends you so we won't talk about that." But, by the way, that's the way it happens. The way it happens is not that we say that we don't believe that anymore, the way it happens is we say we won't talk about that anymore.

Do you want an example? How many sermons have you heard in hell. Jesus said more about hell than anybody else in the whole Bible. We're so in love with the sayings of Jesus we don't quote the sayings that he said the most about, hell.

Serve the gospel. And sometimes serving the gospel will bring disappointment. But also serving the gospel will cost you personally. He mentions this man, Onesiphorus. I was talking to the children downstairs during the first service and I talked to them about Onesiphorus. We decided that was a rather long name and that we should shorten it and they came up with the idea themselves, spontaneously without any help, came up with the idea that we should call him "Nessy." I then had to kind of, once they'd said that, of course, one bright spark said, "Oh, Nessy. Isn't that the legend of the Loch Ness Monster?" I looked at this child, who had been brainwashed obviously by his parents with the English lie that this a legend. I said, "I know of no legend. I know of no legend of the Loch Ness Monster. I know of the Loch Ness Monster and if you are privileged enough to see him or her you will feel very elevated...a number of people, just a few people in the world have been given that great privilege and blessing." Anyway, so we won't call his Nessy, we'll just stick to his full name, Onesiphorus.

And this man wasn't ashamed of the gospel. In fact, Paul tells us something, he came to Rome. Rome was a big city, it was the biggest city in the world at that point, comes to Rome and he looks everywhere, searches everywhere, searches earnestly to try and find where Paul is and eventually he finds Paul in prison. And unlike our prisons today, you know, if you were in prison you didn't get fed, at least the prison didn't feed you. If you were going to eat, you had to have friends on the outside who brought food in to you. If you got cold, they didn't provide with blankets. You'd have to have friends outside who would bring you blankets if you were cold in prison. This is what this man did. Paul says, this man often refreshed him. Often refreshed him. He came and he encouraged me.

And it was difficult, you know, to befriend a man who was a prisoner charged with a capital offense was a risky business. I don't know whether Onesiphorus is alive or dead at this point, what I do know is that there's a kind of breakdown in the Greek at this point. Paul is likely dictating, there's a kind of lump in his throat and somehow or other that communicates itself. I'm reading this in, but certainly there's definitely a breakdown in the Greek. And you notice that the reference to him is bracketed by these pleas for mercy. "May the Lord grant mercy to his household," who are obviously missing him. And, "May the Lord grant mercy to him for the service that he's rendered." Both to Paul and to others. Was he dead already? Was his life at risk? Or was Paul just overwhelmed that this man would put himself in harm's way to be his friend? Whatever it is, it had reached Paul's heart. Paul says, "There's a model of a man who was a servant of the servants of God. A servant of the gospel."

Now, this whole paragraph is meant to impress upon us the need to be faithful in our service. Here are three people, two live on in infamy as faithless, one lives on for quiet, behind the scenes, faithfulness. These were circumstances in which Timothy is to guard the gospel. Deserted by friends, almost total apostasy. Can you imagine such days? Can you imagine such days?

Back in the 9th of March, 1637, Samuel Rutherford was imprisoned in Aberdeen in Scotland. That's in the top northeast coast of Scotland. He was imprisoned for the gospel. And he wrote a letter to a friend of his, the Reverend Alexander Henderson, and he said this to him, "God has called you to Christ's side. And the wind is now in Christ's face in this land and you are with him. You cannot, therefore, expect the sunny side of the hill. But I know that you have resolved to take Christ on any terms." He's writing in Aberdeen and you need to know, in Aberdeen the rain doesn't just come down vertically, it comes horizontally sometimes it even comes up, seriously. And when that rain is battering on your face, its icy blast striking you in the eyes so that you can hardly open your eyelids.

Samuel Rutherford is saying to this man, "The wind is in Christ's face in this land. And it was then." I want to say, it is now here. The wind is in Christ's face. And if you want to follow him, don't expect the sunny side of the hill. If you're following him, you'll be where he is. The wind will be in your face. And it will be painful. There will be a cost. And then only you can answer the question as I asked myself this question, Can I say about myself, can you say about yourself what Rutherford says about Henderson? "I know that you have resolved to take Christ upon any terms." Resolve to take Christ on any terms.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your word. A word of life that inspires us. A word of life that is clear. A word of life handed to us with a shape, a morphe, a form of sound words. Words that are correct and true. Words that are health giving. We thank you that we've embraced them. We have come to know and believe you are our heavenly Father, through your Son our Lord Jesus. And you have called on us, along with your people,

faithful people in other periods of time, to be on his side. To be resolved. To take Christ upon any terms. Whatever that means for tomorrow morning, whatever that means for this week that we've entered, whatever that means for the long term future, we pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit to lay hold of him. In his strong name, we pray. Amen.