



Christ Reformed Community Church

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“Guard the Good Deposit” 2 Timothy 1:13–18

Well, take your Bibles once again and turn with me to the New Testament to 2 Timothy, chapter 1 as we had begun a verse-by-verse study through Paul’s last letter that he wrote to the church. So, it’s a rather significant letter, and we want to study it together and learn all of its truths for our own personal walks with the Lord as well as for the life of our church.

You might know that since the year 1936, Fort Knox just outside of Louisville, Kentucky, has stored the nation’s gold reserves. Nestled in the hills of Kentucky, this Army base serves as a U.S. gold vault, reportedly containing 9.2 million pounds of gold bars. But that’s not all that it contains. During World War II, it also housed the Magna Carta, English crown jewels, several gold reserves from occupied countries of Europe, as well as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; a safe place for these items since the concrete, granite, and steel encasing the vault was built to withstand even an atomic bomb. We lived in Louisville for many years, and the church that we attended was just almost right next to this building, and we used to drive past this impregnable fortress and wonder what it looked like on the inside. Of course, no visitors are allowed. There has never been a successful robbery of Fort Knox, nor has anyone even attempted to take the gold therein. But even if you could get past the barbed wire, you would have quite a distance to cover before you got to the actual building. You would have to look out, for instance, for ground-sweeping radar, hundreds of cameras, air and land military vehicles, and literally thousands of soldiers that are housed nearby on the base. And if somehow you miraculously got past all of that, you would be in for, shall I say, a heavy surprise because you would not be able to open the twenty-two ton door that leads into the gold that is there in that vault. And still yet, how would you carry out all of that gold, 9.2 million pounds’ worth? You would need a transport fleet of armored military trucks to carry it off.

I think it’s safe to say that it would be impossible to steal the gold at Fort Knox. The only person who even attempted to do this was a man by the name of Goldfinger, and he was an actor in the movie in the 1960s, and so, he doesn’t really count. But in the same way, we learned last week that Paul tells the church that it is impossible for the good deposit of the gospel to be successfully destroyed by Satan’s atomic bombs or stolen by demonic henchmen. Paul was very clear to Timothy that God guards the good deposit of the gospel, but that doesn’t mean that Satan doesn’t try to destroy the gospel. That doesn’t mean that Satan doesn’t try to destroy believers of the gospel; and further, that does not mean—and shall we never think—that we too don’t also have the responsibility to guard the good deposit of the riches of the gospel. Well, that’s what we learn from this next section of verses in 2 Timothy, but before we read the text let us pause for a brief

moment and ask the Lord to help us to understand our great responsibility in guarding this good deposit. Let us pray.

Father, You are sovereign over all people and all circumstances and so, Lord, we thank You that even today, You are continually guarding and preserving this precious gospel. We pray this morning that You would help us to learn today afresh what our part is in preserving its message for future generations. We pray these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Let’s hear God’s Word together from 2 Timothy 1 beginning in verse 13. Paul 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.

You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygellus 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.

This is God’s Word. May He etch its eternal truths on all of our hearts this morning by the work of the Spirit.

You know, I imagine as Paul sat in this dark little cell with the looming reality of his impending death, that his mind undoubtedly wandered and reflected to the realm of eternal matters. Perhaps he thought of Isaiah 40:8, “*The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.*” You see, Paul knew that his own life was expendable and would be expended for the sake of the gospel, but he makes it clear in this letter that he was also confident that in the final analysis it was God who was preserving the gospel. As he told Timothy in verse 12, “*I am convinced that He,*” that is God, “*is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.*” In other words, Paul was confident that God was the primary guardian of the gospel, and so in this sense, Paul’s mere death was not the end of gospel proclamation. On the other hand, Paul was not a cold fatalist. Now, Paul was very well aware that this gospel had been entrusted to him to preserve. Paul understood that God’s sovereignty and human responsibility go hand in hand. They do not conflict. And that is why as he approached the darkness of death, he bequeathed to Timothy, his son in the faith, the sacred duty of continuing the brave battle of guarding the gospel.

In fact, the key word of our passage is the word *guard* in verse 14. The key verse is verse 14. Look at it again. Paul says, “*By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.*” Paul bequeathed to Timothy a sacred trust, we could call it; one, as he says here, that involved guarding and then delivering the riches of the gospel to a lost world. Now, we have to ask ourselves the question, “What exactly did this involve?” Well, it involved quite a bit. First of all, let’s remember that Paul’s words were not just for Timothy. Paul fully expected the letter that he wrote to Timothy to be read before the entire assembly at Ephesus, and this teaches us that though Paul’s words are written primarily to pastors, it’s not exclusively written for pastors. It is the church together as a whole that has been given a sacred trust to guard the gospel with their very

lives. As I said, it doesn't remove the responsibility of pastors as the primary guardians, but it doesn't relinquish responsibility from all Christians, either.

Second, we need to make the observation that Paul tells Timothy to guard this gospel, but he tells him to do this even as he reflects upon people, as we read in this passage, who did not guard it well. In fact, he calls out two people by name. That's sort of a big “ouch” to these men who did not guard the gospel well, and then he points out one man who did guard the gospel well, a man that he mentions in verse 16: *“Onesiphorus.”* Onesiphorus is not revealed, let me just mention, as either to be a pastor or an elder, and yet it is this man that Paul points Timothy to in following the example of guarding the gospel. Again, I think this is a small reminder of the responsibility of the church at large—not just pastors and elders—to diligently guard the gospel, and that is what I think these verses find their value in this morning. They provide a wonderful encouragement to do just that. And now these verses teach us, verses 13–18, that every Christian bears the sober responsibility to do their part in guarding the good deposit of the gospel. And what I find in these verses are two critical sets of instructions; two critical sets of instructions which I think are necessary and Paul thought were necessary to follow in order to do the work of guarding the good deposit of the gospel. Let me list them for us.

First of all, Paul tells us to follow scriptural exhortations, to speak the gospel faithfully. We see that in verses 13 and 14. And second, Paul tells us to follow substantial examples to serve the gospel honorably in verses 15–18. So those are our two points: number one, follow scriptural exhortations to speak the gospel faithfully; and number two, follow substantial examples to serve the gospel honorably. We might say that the first one primarily, though not exclusively, applies to pastors and all teachers within the church, and we might say that the second one applies primarily, though exclusively, to all others within the church. The bottom line is that Timothy and us have been given a sacred trust. Now, you well know, many of you well know, that a legal trust is an entity frequently used in estate planning to help a person distribute property or money to provide for a loved one after they've passed away, and you know that a trust is written with a set of rules that determine how, what, when, and where a gift or property is to be distributed to an heir or to a beneficiary. You also know that a trust is a legal entity, and so therefore you have to follow certain rules to ensure that the trust is set up correctly and managed by a reliable individual and properly funded. Many of you have family trusts, which are designed for the purpose of distributing wealth to surviving family members in the event of your death. Well, in the event of Paul's death, he is setting up a gospel trust, and he is telling us this morning that we are the trustees, and he is giving to us certain rules and instructions to follow so that many can become beneficiaries of this sacred trust of the gospel. Let me just say the instructions are far simpler to understand than that of legal trusts, but the stakes are far higher. This is a matter of life and death because it is dealing with what is the right gospel and what is a false gospel, and Paul calls us all to guard this good deposit.

So, let us look at this set of instructions, and the first set of instructions given are found in verses 13 and 14 where Paul simply tells us to follow scriptural exhortations to speak the gospel faithfully. In verses 13 and 14, Paul lists two parallel, though distinct, exhortations that will help us speak the gospel faithfully. These apply, I think, specifically to pastors in their preaching, but generally they apply to all Christians in their witnessing; and let's keep that in mind as we work through them. There's two of them. First of all, Paul instructs Timothy to shadow the apostolic ministry, verse 13, and then in verse 14, he tells Timothy to shield the apostolic message. First, he tells him in

verse 13 to shadow the apostolic ministry. Now, I use the word *shadow* because no matter how hard you try you cannot run from your shadow. Little children try to run from their shadow, but it’s an impossible thing to do, and Paul is telling Timothy not to run from his apostolic shadow. He has set the standard for what ministry of the Word looks like within the church, and it involves a *what* and a *how*. Notice first of all the *what*, the beginning of verse 13. He says, “*Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me.*” Now, Timothy was to follow a pattern.

Now, we must always look at the original Greek, and in this case, it’s very helpful because the word *pattern* was a word that was used to speak of “an outlying sketch or a model.” For instance, an architect makes a sketch before the final blueprints are printed off; or an artist might make a sketch outline before filling in the details with paint; or a writer might write out a brief outline before filling in the story’s details. Well, as an apostle, Paul had provided a pattern, a sketch outline for Timothy, and notice what it consists of. He says, “*Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me.*” The sound words likely refer to God’s Word, generally speaking, and by implication, God’s gospel specifically speaking. Just get with me to chapter 3 and verse 15. Later on, Paul will remind Timothy, “*How from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*” And then he says in verse 16, “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching,*” and so on. These are the sound words. They are sound because they are healthy words. That’s literally what the Greek word *sound* means. It means “healthy.” That reminds us that God’s Word, which centers on the message of a Savior makes the spiritually dead come alive in Christ; and also, it makes the spiritually immature strong and mature in the faith. God’s Word leads to salvation, and it leads to sanctification. You might be familiar with that famous chorus that came to my mind just this morning:

Sweetly echo the gospel call,
Wonderful words of life;
Offer pardon and peace to all,
Wonderful words of life;
Jesus, only Savior,
Sanctify forever.

Beautiful words, wonderful words,
Wonderful words of life.

They’re wonderful words because they’re sound words. They’re healthy words. And Paul uses this language because the talk of false teaching was spreading like the bad sickness of gangrene. That’s what he said in chapter 2, verse 16. He is telling Timothy that he cannot adjust what the Word of God says; that pastors have not been commissioned to change the Word in their preaching, and God’s people have not been authorized to adjust the message of the gospel in their witnessing. God’s Word remains the standard, the pattern, or the outline that has been established. Now, anybody who has been a student knows the importance of not plagiarizing, don’t you? Plagiarizing is an act of theft. Why? Well, because it involves stealing the intellectual property of another, and sometimes the only thing that protects a work from plagiarism are the smallest characters on your keyboard called quotation marks. If you leave those quotation marks out before a sentence and after a sentence and closing a sentence in, you can have leveled against you the charge of plagiarism. Well, Paul is telling Timothy that God’s Word and God’s gospel cannot be tampered

with. He is giving God’s people authority to plagiarize the Word of God, to keep it exactly as it says, to keep the gospel exactly as it says. We aren’t to adjust it. We aren’t to put it into our own words. We are to speak it with exact accuracy.

This is what it means to retain the standard of sound words. And just for a brief little window into how Paul thought, Paul’s final faith was in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. He said in this passage earlier, “*I know whom I have believed.*” But Paul still nevertheless understood that trust in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ meant that one was aware of what this person did, and that is why last week we saw in verses 9 and 10 this rich exposition of the details of this glorious gospel and the theology of it. Why is that? Well, because courage in one’s convictions of the gospel involves clarity about those convictions, which means every Christian must be a student of the Word. They must know their theology. They must retain the standard of sound words. I think this is perhaps why many Christians shy away from gospel proclamation. They simply don’t know what they believe, and they’re afraid to proclaim the gospel and have people question it. Paul tells Timothy, “Make sure you know the word of God.” And Paul is specifically speaking to pastors, all pastors. He’s telling them God’s Word is not their word; it’s God’s Word. Pastors are not chefs; they’re waiters. Their job is to serve God’s food to God’s people without messing it up. They present God’s truth accurately so that God’s people are enriched by gospel truths and become spiritually healthy. But the content of Timothy’s sermons—it might surprise you—mattered to Paul almost as much as the character of Timothy’s soul because the *what* is followed by the *how*.

Notice the rest of verse 13. How is this to be done? Paul says it’s to be done “*in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*” He’s saying, first, speaking God’s truth must be done in faith. That means confidence in God and the power of His unchanged message. And secondly, it’s to be done in love. That is simply with gentleness and with patience and with kindness, so that spiritually dead unbelievers and spiritually sick and immature believers will receive a healthy dose of God’s Word. You could liken it to giving medicine to your children. You know, as parents the experience is always so much more pleasant and peaceful and positive when you gently and patiently help your kids take medicine instead of roughly forcing it down their throats and becoming angry and impatient with them. And what Paul is saying is that in the same vein, strong doses of truth are easier to swallow when it’s done with love and grace within the church. You know, Paul said in Ephesians 4:15 that when the truth is spoken in love, we all grow up into Christ. This is why I think every pastor and every teacher in the church must view their job as that of a parent.

You remember what Paul told the Galatians; the Galatians, by the way, who were teetering on adopting a different gospel? He affectionately told them, “*My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!*” He had love but notice verse 13. These characteristics of faith and love can only be demonstrated—notice verse 13 again—by those truly “*in Christ Jesus.*” Now, Paul was pointing out our union with Christ is the foundation to being able to demonstrate the love of Christ. And that theme of union will pop up again later on in our passage, but let me just say that for pastors, elders, and any teacher in the church, verse 13 especially applies. But it also applied to all Christians who are responsible to proclaim the gospel to unbelievers. Shadowing the apostolic ministry set down by Paul involves not deviating from either the accuracy of God’s truth on the one hand, or the attitude of God’s truth-teller on the other hand.

But if the first scriptural exhortation involves shadowing the apostolic ministry, the second is parallel. It’s found in verse 14 where Paul tells us that we are to shield the apostolic message. And just as the first exhortation in verse 13 involved the *what* and the *how*, the second exhortation involves a *what* and a *how*, but the *what* is found at the end of verse 14. Notice Paul says at the end, “*Guard the good deposit entrusted to you.*” Now, this is the heart of Paul’s instructions to Timothy not only in this passage but actually in the entire book of 2 Timothy. And notice it’s parallel but not identical to verse 13. First of all, verse 13 had to do more with God’s truth in general and the gospel by implication, but here in verse 14, this has to do with the gospel entirely. He is talking about the good deposit of the gospel, the cardinal gospel truth set down in God’s Word, not just the general teaching of the apostle. You see, there are always secondary points of disagreement within the church, secondary points that one person may interpret differently than another person, and it’s not a cause for battling it out in the parking lot and duking it out. But there is one thing worth fighting for, and that is the good deposit of the gospel.

Paul is telling Timothy he must be tough. Matters where the gospel is at stake means that we must be bulldogs. As Steve Lawson says, “We must not only be dogmatic about the gospel, we must be bull-dogmatic about the gospel.” “*Guard the good deposit entrusted to you.*” And really this is a repeat of what Paul told Timothy at the end of his first letter. If you skip back to 1 Timothy 6:20, you’ll see this where he told him, “*O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.*” Now, I want you to notice that word *guard*. It’s the Greek word *phyllassō*. It’s actually the same word that Paul used back in verse 12. I mentioned that it’s a word that is used to describe prison guards that are guarding prisoners. That may well be why Paul uses the word because he himself is being guarded closely. But notice back up in verse 12, Paul spoke about his unflinching confidence that God could guard the deposit of his life, and further, that the deposit of the gospel entrusted to him was kept safe by God’s hands. That was the emphasis of verse 12. But here in verse 14, the emphasis is on Timothy’s responsibility to guard the good deposit. As Paul says here, it’s been entrusted to him by Paul for this purpose, to guard it. Why? Because simply there are always false teachers and tweekers of the gospel present in the church, and we, like Timothy, are commissioned to be soldiers that guard the gold reserves of the gospel so that it’s riches can be inherited by sinners in whom the Spirit of God will ultimately move.

My history-loving children were watching the other day a movie by the title of *National Treasure*. Many of you are familiar with this movie. It’s really a great movie, but it is a fictitious story of a man by the name of Benjamin Franklin Gates. He was an historian, and in this movie, he’s searching for a lost treasure, a lost treasure of precious jewels, metals, artwork, other artifacts that happen to be accumulated in a massive stockpile by looters and warriors dating all the way back over many millennia, all the way back to ancient Egypt. And the movie tradition said that the Knights Templar, which was a group of warriors was designated with the job of protecting the treasure, but eventually they handed it off to American Free Masons. And Gates found out that there was a secret message that could be decoded on the back of the Declaration of Independence, and so he breaks into the National Archives building in Washington, D.C., and enters a preservation room, having to go past all sorts of high-tech security that is guarding this Declaration, so he can decode the message on the back and find the treasure.

Fake story, but there is the true story about the *Mona Lisa* painting. I’m not big into artwork, but some say that the *Mona Lisa* is the world’s most famous painting. It is held, by the way, in bullet-proof glass in France. And from what I’ve been told, it is so valuable that it’s only been showcased outside of its safe place on two occasions in the last one hundred years. Well, I can guarantee you that the transporters of that painting when they were taking it to show it off, I can guarantee you that they were not required to be artists themselves. They were not required to change this famous piece of artwork. I can furthermore assure you that they were not given paint and paintbrushes to improve the painting. They were given one job and one job only, and that was to guard the painting with their lives as they transported it to the declared declaration. They were not to improve the painting but were to ensure its delivery in its original condition. That’s really all Paul is telling Timothy here. The church has not been tasked to change the gospel, to tweak the gospel, to adjust the gospel, to accommodate the gospel but to preserve its message to succeeding generations and to deliver its original message. As John MacArthur rightly says, and I quote:

The most solemn responsibility that any believer has, especially those the Lord has called to be preachers and teachers, is to uphold and defend the integrity of His Word, and this includes upholding and defending the integrity of the old, old story of the gospel.

When I was in Los Angeles a couple of weeks ago, I was in the hotel lobby going over my dissertation, trying to get ready to go and defend it, and in walked a famous preacher. If I said his name, you would know who I’m talking about. He has a really strange accent. He is on national radio. You hear him all the time. Now, I couldn’t believe that’s who it was, so I walked up to him and introduced myself. He didn’t know who I was, obviously, but we had a wonderful conversation, and we just began talking, and he happened to be preaching through 2 Timothy himself. And so, we began talking about just different resources to preach through 2 Timothy and the message of 2 Timothy, the duty of guarding the gospel with our lives, and so our conversation then extended into a bookstore where we began looking at all the commentaries on 2 Timothy. This preacher shared with me that recently he went to a very well-known seminary, a very well-known seminary. In fact, when I was a child, I thought that someday I would attend this seminary because it was known for its conservative theology. But through the years, liberalism seeped into its foundation and it took a somewhat surprising slippage from conservative Christian thought, so that by the time I was looking at seminaries, my father who was helping me steered me away from this institution. But this preacher was called to speak to the faculty of this school, and he actually preached a message to them—good for him—that mildly rebuked the faculty for moving away from their conservative gospel roots. You know, that’s a small reminder to us that even great seminaries and churches who have been bastions of truth can easily fall prey to unbiblical teaching if they are not vigilant. We must be on our guard. It’s a serious matter.

Paul told the churches in Galatia that those who preached a different gospel are to be an anathema. They are to be damned. And I think this is precisely why this second exhortation involves not only a *what*, which is to guard the gospel at all costs, but also a *how*. Notice the beginning of verse 14. Here’s the *how*: “*By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.*” How do we preserve it? How do we guard it? Well, Paul wants Timothy to know, as the Word of God wants us to know this morning, it’s not by our own power. God’s sovereign fingerprints are all over the guarding of this gospel. Now, we’re discussing the *how*, second, but notice it appears in the verse first. Now, that’s because Paul wants Timothy to know before he begins to pursue his responsibility of guarding the gospel, he needs to know what power is infusing

him. It’s the power of a sovereign God, the Holy Spirit that indwells him. In fact, this is a favorite theme of Paul.

Notice how Paul’s appeal to Timothy has come full circle. If you notice back in verse 6, Paul told him to *“fan into flame”* his spiritual gift, but then he said verse 7, *“For God gave us a spirit not of fear.”* He’s talking about the Holy Spirit; the power is in the Spirit. And, of course, this was followed by four commands, verse 8, notice it: *“Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord.”* In verse 8 again: *“But share in suffering for the gospel.”* In verse 13, the third command: *“Follow the pattern of the sound words.”* And now verse 14, the fourth command: *“Guard the good deposit.”* And all of these commands which began by Paul reminding Timothy of the power of the Spirit ends in verse 14, Paul reminding him of the *“Holy Spirit who dwells within [him].”* Paul has come full circle. The beginning, the middle, and the end of his message has been the Spirit of God is what’s going to uphold you through all of this. In fact, notice back in verse 8, he says *“Share in suffering for the gospel,”* adding *“by the power of God.”* So, the beginning he reminds him of the Power of the Spirit, the middle he reminds him of the power of the Spirit, and at the end of all these commands, he reminds him of the power of the Spirit.

And just notice again—let’s be good Bible students—this is the second time that Paul switches from addressing Timothy personally to addressing the church corporately. Notice he says, *“The Holy Spirit who dwells within us.”* He did that back in verse 7: *“For God gave us a spirit not of fear.”* You see, the pastoral epistles were not just written to Timothy. They were not just written to pastors. They were written for the entire church, and as Paul said in Romans 8:31, *“If God is for us, who can be against us?”* And you might say, “Well, a lot of people,” and that is true, but Paul is telling Timothy, “Greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world.” So, the question is how are we doing in guarding the gospel? We have to ask ourselves this question personally. In our witnessing, in our teaching of these truths, how much are we guarding the gospel? Do we accommodate the gospel for the world? Do we accommodate the gospel to our neighbors so that it will be more palatable and acceptable to them, to the world? What do we do as a church? What do we stand for? Now, Paul says we must guard it, and this guarding requires sacrifice.

Now, let me just remind you, we’re looking at two critical sets of instructions which are necessary to follow in order to guard the good deposit of the gospel, and we’ve seen the first set of instructions where Paul told us to follow scriptural exhortations to speak the gospel faithfully. But there’s a second set of instructions, and it’s found in verses 15–18 where Paul tells us to follow substantial examples to serve the gospel honorably. Now, you might think as you read this that these verses are somewhat disconnected, but they’re really not. Verses 13 and 14 serve as sort of the classroom instruction, but verses 15–18 is where Paul takes Timothy, Paul takes us into the field, or Paul takes us into the lab, if you like, and he shows to us—listen to this—real life examples of what it means to guard the gospel. And he gives to us not just a positive example, but first he gives to us a negative example because Paul wants us to understand how to do it and how not to do it. This is what a good teacher does, so this is very applicable, and this actually flows very well with what Paul is saying in verses 13 and 14. These verses are really not separated from what he just said. So, in these substantial examples, Paul gives a negative example, and he gives a positive example.

Notice, first of all, the negative example of deserters, the negative example of deserters, and Paul speaks broadly. First of all, notice the beginning of verse 15. He says, “*You are aware,*” speaking to Timothy, “*that all who are in Asia turned away from me.*” That’s an all-inclusive statement. He says, “*All turned away from me.*” We read at the end of this letter that Dr. Luke, who is the writer of Acts and the book of Luke, was the only one that remained with Paul during his final imprisonment. Well, Luke tells us in Acts 19:10 that Paul stayed in Ephesus two and a half years and that all the residents of Asia heard the Word of the Lord, and many believed. And now Paul is saying they’ve, “*All turned away from me.*” The great awakening had been followed by a great defection, and this serves as a powerful object lesson for Timothy. He says, “*All who are in Asia turned away from me.*” Now, let me just clarify. I don’t think that Paul meant every single individual, literally every person.

Ephesus itself was located on the province of Asia. We know there were at least six other churches on Asia Minor from Revelation 2 and 3. We know there were many faithful saints in these congregations. There were many faithful saints in Ephesus where Timothy ministered. There was Timothy; he hadn’t defected. There was Onesiphorus, who had not defected, and his household that are mentioned in verse 16. So, this is hyperbolic language. This is Paul sort of exaggerating because he is so depressed. You know, I’ve talked to some of you who have actually been in that underground prison in Rome where Paul was as he wrote. And I’ve been told you can barely stand fully erect because it’s such a claustrophobic space, and there’s only a faint light that is shining through. Now, we could say that the blackness of that prison worked its way into Paul’s heart. He was human, and he was depressed, and it felt like all had turned away from him, and almost that was true. Only Luke was with him. Titus and Crescens were gone. Demas had left him high and dry. Alexander had done him much harm. William Hendriksen in his commentary conjectures that several leading Christians in the province of Asia, including the city of Ephesus had been summoned to Rome to appear on the witness stand in favor of Paul, and all of them refused to go for fear they would suffer the same fate of Paul. They deserted him. This could be true.

In any event, there was some major defection just by virtue of the language Paul uses. He says they “*all,*” notice this, “*turned away from me.*” *Apostrephō* is the word “turned away,” and even in the pronunciation of that, *apostrephō*, you can see that we derive the word *apostasy*. In fact, Paul uses it that way in chapter 4 and verse 4, speaking about those who apostatized from the truth. This could mean that they literally walked away from the gospel, but at a minimum, it means they walked away from Paul; and because Paul was in prison for preaching the gospel, it may have meant that they were walking away from the gospel because they were ashamed of that gospel. This was more than a betrayal of personal friendship. And you know, to be rejected by the world is one thing, but I often tell people to be church-hurt is quite another thing. To be hurt by fellow co-laborers of the gospel is absolutely heart wrenching, and Paul experienced that. Proverbs 7:17 says, “*A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.*” But they deserted Paul. You know, adversity separates the chaff of surface friendship from the substance of real friendship. As someone eloquently wrote:

As the shadow once said to the body, “Who is a friend like me? I follow you wherever you go, in sunlight or moonlight. I never forsake you.” “True,” said the body. “You will go with me in sunlight and moonlight, but where are you when neither the sun nor the moon shines upon me?”

This hurt Paul. In fact, it hurt him so bad that he switches from broadly speaking about this pain to specifically mentioning certain individuals at the end of verse 15. Notice your Bibles. He says, “Among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes.” Now, we don’t know who these men were, but Timothy did. Perhaps they were ringleaders in discouraging people from associating with Paul. Undoubtedly, they were self-preservationists who feared they would suffer the same fate of Paul; and you know, I think it’s interesting that the pain they caused him was so bad that he doesn’t even mention specifically what they did. The name *Phygelus*, by the way, means “fugitive.” Probably appropriate. Phygelus and Hermogenes were deserters, fugitives, on the run from the gospel. They had deserted Paul.

I think it reminds us of the great damage we cause not only in the church when we desert the church, when we treat others badly—our brothers and sisters in Christ—we cause emotional and internal damage, but we also affect the testimony of the gospel. What kind of testimony is this, that these men who now had rendered themselves unfit to be leaders, had deserted the great apostle? Reminds me of John Calvin who took a stand and disciplined from the church in Geneva, some powerful men in the city. He disciplined them and would not allow them to take the Lord’s Supper because they were known to be immoral men. And guess what happened? He got kicked out of the church and kicked out of the city for it. And John Calvin said that his deserters would roam the streets, and these deserters became accusers that walked around trying to establish their innocence by directing against him all accusations that they could. You know, it’s sad when this sort of thing happens in the church but happens it does. Remember verse 8? Paul says, “*Share in suffering for the gospel,*” and this suffering sometimes includes suffering at the hands of other professing Christians. Paul tells Timothy, “Don’t be a deserter of the church. Don’t be a deserter of fellow Christians. This damages the gospel something fierce. Serve the gospel honorably, even when it requires great sacrifice.”

But this is why Paul’s next words are so helpful. He moves from the negative example of deserters to speak about the positive example of refreshers. *Onēsiphoros*—you can pronounce it that way, or you can pronounce it *O-ne-sif-o-rus*, however you want to pronounce it. He is spoken about. Notice in contrast to the deserters, Paul gives a positive example of refreshers. He changes his tone. He says, “*May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains.*” The positive example of this man is highlighted, first of all, by his encouragement of service. Notice Paul says, “*For he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains.*” While better-known men deserted Paul, men likely in leadership and potentially elders in the church, unlike them, this man, Onesiphorus, went to Rome when Paul was in prison, and he refreshed Paul. *Anapsychō* is the Greek word for “refreshed.” You know what it means? I love this word. It refers to “causing someone to breathe more easily under the weight of anxiety.” It’s as if Paul was having a panic attack, but here came Onesiphorus, and he refreshed him. He refreshed him emotionally, spiritually, physically. He lifted Paul’s spirits. He encouraged him with the gospel. He met his material and physical needs with food and supplies. In fact, the name *Onesiphorus* means “profit bringer.”

You know, that old cistern that Paul sat in was just as dry as Paul’s soul, but here came Onesiphorus, refreshing him by reminding him of the life-giving water of eternal life, as he entered his last days. And further, still, notice unlike the deserters, this man, verse 16, “*was not ashamed of my chains,*” Paul says. Now, he literally sacrificed his life. He risked his own life associating

with a common criminal of the state. Nero was always looking for more Christians he could kill as scapegoats. This was a time to lie low. This was a time to be quiet, but not Onesiphorus. He was not ashamed of the gospel, and this is revealed in his willing service. You know, service to others in the church is always sacrificial. Service in the church might mean we don't get attention; we don't get public recognition. It might mean that we're not teachers, we're not preachers. It might mean that we sacrifice greatly financially, emotionally, materially, certainly spiritually. Service always involves sacrifice. And Paul holds Onesiphorus before Timothy and before others to remind us that the gospel has not called us to be loners. It has called us to serve one another out of love.

You see, whether Paul was preaching before hundreds or he was by himself in a prison, Onesiphorus was there with him. Why? Because *“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”* And this is that theme of union with Christ that is coming out again, but what I really like is what he says next. Paul points out not only his encouragement of service but notice his earnestness for service. Notice verse 17. He says, *“But when he,”* that is, Onesiphorus, *“arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me.”* I mean, he searched for him high and low. Finding him required great earnestness which could only be fueled by his love for him. First of all, Onesiphorus probably had never been to Rome. He didn't know his way around. There wasn't any GPS devices. Second, as I told you, much of Rome had been destroyed by a fire a couple of years before. It was in sheer chaos, and for a short period of time, no one even knew where Paul was being detained; and even those that knew where Paul was being detained, those Christians were in hiding. They couldn't be asked because they were in hiding, fearing they would suffer the same fate. And by the way, after he finally located Paul, what sort of bribe did he have to offer those Roman soldiers to actually get inside that cistern to visit him? You see, service to others never comes apart from initiative. It never comes apart from earnestness. When you see a need, you must meet it. When a hole of service needs filled, we must fill it. Loyalty to our Lord is measured, I'll tell you, by our earnestness in serving others. Onesiphorus' visit to Paul in prison, I think, was probably viewed by others as too dangerous, too sacrificial, and not a worthy enough ministry. But I want to say quite boldly that Jesus Christ would have disagreed with that sort of attitude. Do you remember these words? Just listen. These come from Jesus:

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

You see, Onesiphorus was refreshing Christ when he refreshed Paul. And when we serve others in the church, we are refreshing Christ. This is the doctrine of union with Christ in very, very practical terms. Because when we are in union with Christ, we are in union with one another. So, when we bless others, we are blessing Christ. Now, we may ask “Well, how much do I have to give?” Right? That's always the question. Well, notice Paul moves from his encouragement of service and his earnestness for service, verse 18, to his endurance in service. I love this. He says in verse

18, *“May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that day!”* He sort of gives this sort of blessing upon Onesiphorus that he might find mercy from the Lord on that day, speaking about the final day. And if you look back at verse 16, he grants a blessing on Onesiphorus’ family. I purposely skipped over explaining that phrase but look at verse 16. He says, *“May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus.”* We don’t have long to linger here, and we’re sort of dabbling in the speculative, but I think the blessing of mercy Paul wishes on Onesiphorus’ household in verse 16 might indicate that this man was dead. This man was arrested and imprisoned and executed before Paul was because he had associated with Paul and risked his life. And if so, he would have died valiantly for the gospel as a positive example, and Paul wishes his family mercy in the absence of him from the world. This might make sense, by the way, of Paul granting mercy from the Lord on Onesiphorus himself in verse 18 in light of the coming day of judgment. His life had already been lived. He was now in the presence of the Lord, and Paul was confident that on that final day, he would be vindicated for his service. May God grant him mercy. And I need to admit to you, it’s also true that Onesiphorus may not have been dead. Perhaps he was just missing. He was on his way back from Rome to Ephesus, and he hadn’t made it home yet.

But what I really want you to notice is that Paul says something here at the end of verse 18. He says, Timothy, *“You well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus.”* Now, that’s interesting to me. Paul has been speaking about his most recent service when he came to Rome to search for him, when he refreshed him in prison, but now Paul tethers all of this service back to his service within the local church at Ephesus. This man was a member of this church. Timothy knew him well. It was Onesiphorus’ commitment to the local church that he was first known for, and perhaps best known for. Paul notes him not only for his encouragement of service and his earnestness in service, but most of all his endurance in service within the local church. I think it’s a reminder to us that service for God always begins where we are today. Greatness for the kingdom begins within the local church. Service in the local church then leads, I think, to God opening doors to have a wider influence elsewhere, but I think it all begins within the church. It is the local church that Paul is emphasizing here. I love that. He’s saying his service is rooted in his endurance in the local church. I’ve never known someone the Lord has used in a great way who wasn’t first a servant in the church. That’s why I love verse 18.

We’re running out of time. Finally, I want to say a word about those, especially Roman Catholics, who teach that verses 16–18 are an example of Paul praying for the dead. Let me just say, this is a wrong interpretation for several reasons, and I’m just going to list three to you. Number one, it can’t be proven that Onesiphorus was actually dead, first of all. We don’t know that. We don’t know that. Maybe he was dead, but we don’t know for sure. Secondly, Paul was not engaging in intercessory prayer in verses 16–18. He is simply granting a blessing upon him. He’s not praying to the Lord. He’s writing a letter to Timothy, and he’s saying Timothy I hope that Onesiphorus’ household is blessed, and that Onesiphorus himself is blessed with mercy. And finally, number three, prayers for the dead assume there is a purgatory, and that is a doctrine that the Scriptures simply don’t teach and don’t even mention anywhere. So, one simply should not base a whole doctrine on such shaky ground.

We don’t know if Onesiphorus was actually dead or not. But here’s what we do know. By the time that we read this letter in the twenty-first century, not only is Onesiphorus dead, but Paul is dead,

and Timothy is dead, and the call today is for us to guard the gospel deposit of riches. It's our turn, and unlike our nation's gold reserve which allows no visitors, we must invite all to come and receive the lifegiving, soul-enriching gospel of Jesus Christ. We might say that it's our privilege, but we must say that it's our duty. And it's not just the Pauls and the Timothys, it is the no-names that bear the responsibility. It's the strange names of Phygellus and Hermogenes, the negative examples, and the positive example of Onesiphorus which go before us, and the question is which example will we follow? Let us follow the example of Onesiphorus. Let us value his gospel. May we spread it gladly. May we suffer for it bravely, and may we serve it honorably to the glory of God alone. Let us pray.

Lord, thank You for Your truth. Your Word is truth, and Father it is so real to us this morning as we read about real people. Father, we read about the sacred trust you gave not just Paul, not just Timothy, but us as well by the power of the Spirit to guard this gospel as a church, as individuals, to value it, to love it, to guard it, to fight for it. Lord, help us to do that. When we are weak, we're really strong in You because greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world. Help us to believe this this morning. Lord, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.