

“Walking in the Spirit”: that is how I have entitled what will be our study of 1 Timothy 1:18-20. I don’t know how many of you follow the news on a regular basis, but I would give this exhortation to the body of Christ. We will not live out our faith in the coming 20 years the ways we did the past. The forces in our culture which are becoming more and more focused on suppressing Biblical Christianity are becoming more and more powerful. Already there are some of the large, mega churches that have fallen, and they are embracing both homosexuality and same sex marriage. Someone left at our house a Time magazine with a very well written article. In that article for almost the first time ever in a secular publication did someone say directly what in fact is the ultimate issue for the church. The said the ultimate issue here is not same-sex marriage and it is not homosexuality. The issue is the Bible. The article correctly pointed out the Bible is perfectly clear: marriage is between a man and a woman and homosexuality is a sin. That is what the Bible says. In order for the church to accommodate the now in place agenda of the LBGT community, we will have to sacrifice both of those truths, in other words we will have to say we abandon the Bible. Already, as you know, there are a number of denominations which have done that. Please understand they did that long before this issue arose. Therefore it has been easy for them to accommodate a new demand from our culture, that we rearrange what we think God wants of us in order to accommodate what our neighbors demand. As the next 20 years unfold, this business of walking in the Spirit is going to become more and more precisely aimed at our submission to the Word of God and our willingness to pay the price of obedience. You just know that.

It would be easy for us, I think, to become very impressed and perhaps depressed in the consideration of the rapid shifting of our culture away from anything resembling Christianity, but we should remember in the long history of God’s calling people out to be His own – remember that is what the business is: we tend to think, “I want to be saved and go to heaven” and that is true enough. But God is saying, “I am gathering a people for myself. I will be their God; they will be my people.” The ultimate issue is whether or not we identify with, we are connected with, we are obedient to, we follow after, we say, “I am a child of God through Jesus Christ.” That is the issue finally, “and I understand that God has spoken in His word and I must agree with what He has said.”

This has not been easy in any age and in some ages it has been exceedingly difficult. I appreciated the reading from Jeremiah 1:1-10 because as he pointed out that man was called to be God’s servant when the culture of Judah had become almost indistinguishable from the surrounding pagan nations. Idolatry was practiced in the nation from top to bottom and most of the time his words were received with mockery and scorn. You might recall that at one point his servant Baruch is asked to come in and read the prophecies to the king. The king was sitting next to a brazier, a kind of open fire pit and as the Baruch read the prophecies he would cut off a portion of it and throw it into the fire. So let us not be sunk down in self-pity nor let us run to hide, but let us consider that God has more than sufficient strength and wisdom to sustain us through all that will be asked of us in the days to come.

When Paul wrote his letter to Timothy (1 Tim. 1:18-20) he wrote in the context of a morally disintegrating Roman Empire. It was extremely corrupt in its practices and it was extremely hostile to Christianity because Christianity believed in purity and a focused devotion to the One Lord. You might recall that during those days and thereafter Christians were burned at the stake, thrown to the [lions] to be eaten: it was not a friendly environment. But the church grew! Until finally at some point down the line Christians began to outnumber and out speak the hostile voices. Until the trumpet sounds, beloved, and until the voice of the arch-angel cries and the skies open and the Lord Jesus comes on the

clouds, do not stop believing or serving! Heaven forbid that the church should anticipation of the Lord’s return.

When we listen to Paul’s letter to Timothy, remembering this larger environment of hostility and equally incomprehension, I think we might sense something in his words of Paul’s deep desire that Timothy will cultivate the same passion which rules Paul’s heart for the Lord and the Lord’s people. This is what he writes:

“This charge I entrust to you, Timothy my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this some have made a shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”

In that brief paragraph we have words that touch on three important topics for the life of the church. The first is the issue of a person’s call and spiritual gifts from the Lord. The second is the question of spiritual warfare relative to the life of the church. The third is church discipline as an aspect of that warfare.

Let us think for a moment about Timothy. Timothy was Paul’s protégé, he was his understudy, he disciple, his charge, his pupil, his apprentice. We understand that if not actually leading him to faith in Jesus Christ he perhaps confirmed that faith. We know less about Timothy than we know about Paul from the Word, but we do know some [things]. We know that Timothy’s father was a Greek and his mother was a Jewess. In other words he came from a mixed marriage: how common was that. Because this was generally known amongst the people where they lived, Paul actually had Timothy circumcised in order to remove a potential source of controversy and even offense with the Jewish community in the area. We know that both Timothy’s mother and grandmother had come to faith long before he did. Further it appears that even though his mother had married a Gentile Timothy had been taught the sacred scriptures. Of those Paul will say a little later on (2 Tim. 3:15) that those scriptures were able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. So we can surmise that it was at least in part a result of Timothy’s sound knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures as well as his good character which earned him, according to Luke’s account in Acts 16:2, a good reputation in his own city and the neighboring city. He is a man of knowledge and a man of good reputation, a man of sound faith, a man who has been raised in a home where the word of God was available and taught to him. So thinking about that we might conclude and realize that Timothy was more like Paul than he was [like] a raw convert from the pagan world who would have no knowledge of God and the covenants and the promises from the history of God’s dealings with Israel. Too often when we talk about Timothy all we say is that he was probably timid and needed to be encouraged a great deal. But in fact I think Timothy was a well-equipped young man who had a great richness of resources poured into his life and therefore was well in a condition to respond to the call of God. Hang on to that thought for we will return to it.

It is important for us to realize, to know that it is not primarily a person’s physical age which determines their spiritual maturity. Rather it is a person’s faith-knowledge of the word. One of the favorite portions of Psalm 119 for me – I delight in reading that psalm – is found at 119:97-100. We read this: *“O how I love thy Law,”* David says, *“it is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my*

teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.” If we reflect on this we realize that it is not just that David knew the laws of God, he loved them. He embraced them. He wanted them. He pursued after them. It is not just that David knew the laws of God; he meditated upon them, they were the substance of his thought and his reflections. It is not just that David knew the laws of God; he kept them. It is in the keeping that you discover the full depth of their reality and their power to bless.

In 1 Timothy 1:18 Paul refers to the *“...prophecies made previously about you.”* In chapter 4 verse 14 Paul repeats the essence of this exhortation. *“Do not neglect the gift you have which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.”* Do not neglect: it is likely, most likely indeed, that Paul refers to the same event, this time of prophecy and laying on of hands, in 2 Timothy 1:6, although in this instance instead of referring to the whole council Paul personalizes it to what he himself was engaged in, what he did. So he says, *“...for this reason I remind you, Timothy, to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has given us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.”* “A spirit not of fear...” We have 20 years in front of us of deepening hostility, deepening incomprehension of the way of Christ; we will see more and more churches fall away into apostasy, they will abandon the Word in order to remain safe in the culture. You and I should not be afraid. We should not be afraid. Rather we should fan into a flame the gift of God.

This by the way is the origin of the practice – we do it here as well – of church officers or elders laying their hands on the man being installed as the pastor or people being sent out as missionaries. There is an expectation that in this context, when we pray for these people, that they will receive the Spirit’s anointing which will manifest itself in the exercise of spiritual gifts. That is the expectation, that is the desire, that these people will now be specially empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Questions rightly arise at that moment if you reflect upon it. The first question is, where do spiritual gifts come from? Surely they come from God. If you read the scriptures, if you are familiar with them, as between whether God gives them or men, human agency, the scripture is very clear. In I Corinthians 12:11 we are told that the Spirit apportions or “divides out” to each one individually as He wills. The Spirit is sovereign in His distribution of gifts. However any contradiction, or at least the appearance of such, can be removed if we remember that God often even if not always operates through the agency of people. So if the elders gather around and lay their hands on someone, and ask God’s blessing our expectation and our belief is that the Holy Spirit, God Himself, has directed them to do so and will exercise His gracious will through them. Do we believe it?

It is the sad history of all churches that whereas they begin with the flame of faith after a while the form replaces the substance, and we just do things with no lively expectation that anything real has happened. I had the privilege of going to a lovely wedding yesterday performed by one of our elders, Mr. Hammonds. He did a magnificent job. All the right things were said, and all the right prayers were prayed. But being an old cynic as I am, the thought was, “Well, will it last?” Now that’s a bad question, because in the event my heart is not questioning the bride and groom; my heart is questioning the intentionality of God to honor the prayers that were lifted up in His name, and whether or not He in fact will act to preserve and to bless. You do understand the difference?

So when we pray for someone, when we lay hands on someone, when we see that they are anointed by our intention, do we believe it and therefore have the expectation that God in fact will do what He wants done through those servants? Faith is a matter of the heart. God often even if not always operates through the agency of people. We see a need, we are inwardly prompted to pray either that the Lord will provide what is needed, whether through ourselves or others, whether through natural means or if we are spiritually attuned and oriented, by supernatural means, do we believe God will supply all that is needed to [the workers] in Nepal to take care of the Nepalese. Do we understand what was said to us today? An openness by a Buddhist society to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is worth an earthquake, because otherwise every soul is damned for eternity. Do we believe it? So some shall be saved.

The Spirit answers our prayers by bestowing His gifts. In this case that we are thinking about the Spirit is sovereign in the time, when He gives the gifts. The Spirit is sovereign in number: He gives as many gifts as He feels are needed. He is sovereign in kind: whichever kind of gifts are needed He will give. But this emphatically does not mean He is indifferent to the thoughts and desires of those who are saved. On the contrary the purpose of God is to restore humanity to the place for which humanity was made in the first place by God. He wants to reconcile us to Himself so that we are now partners with Him in the accomplishing of His purposes. He is not indifferent to our prayers. We are called by God to walk in faith and friendship as we learn to love one another as Jesus loved His disciples.

Spiritual gifts are a unique kind of power. Are they like magic? Contrary to magic – magic teaches that the practitioner of magic actually controls the power that he or she has received. The Christian understanding of spiritual gifts however is quite different. We would understand that the recipient of the gift must work in concert with and in dependency upon the Spirit of God. That is the substance of prayer after prayer after prayer. “O Father in heaven, as I come to Your word and seek to study it, as I rely upon Your Spirit to guide me in opening its meaning, as I draft a text in order that I might convey what You want said to Your people, may You Father in heaven bestow upon me Your Spirit that the people who hear will receive what You want to have said.” Pray, pray, pray! It is equally true when we consider our vacation Bible School. “Heaven, God of heaven, You are going to send children here. We want them to encounter Jesus Christ. Therefore we want every single member of the staff to be a vessel of the Holy Spirit, cleansed for the Spirit’s purposes, freed from the static of worldliness, so that the Spirit of God can freely flow through them and touch those children and bring to them the sense of the presence of God and open their hearts and minds to the truth that they need a Savior who loves them.” Pray, pray, pray! We are getting to that [aspect of the faith], it is called spiritual warfare.

The objective when it comes to spiritual gifts is that God will accomplish His purposes through His faith filled servants. Of course at the same time we understand, is that the objective is that we ourselves will grow in our love for God as we grow in love for one another as we learn how to serve.

But then the question arises, and it is a legitimate question, “Is it possible to misuse spiritual gifts?” Let’s just run over a little bit of what we have already heard. Obviously a spiritual gift can be neglected, because Paul has just gotten through telling Timothy, “Don’t neglect...” in chapter 4:14. In 2 Timothy 1:6 Paul tells Timothy to fan into flame the gift of God that he has received. We should listen to those exhortations. Some do and some don’t know what spiritual gift they have. Sometimes churches expend a great deal of time and effort to do a study of the gifts and to sort out and figure out what gift: those

can be valuable. But I think there comes a weight of responsibility as we begin to understand how God has equipped us. What do you think? Will God be indifferent as to whether or not we neglect or use our spiritual gifts? [It is] scarcely possible to think so. One of the issues that arises, let me blunt, having been there myself: sometimes I think that Christians are too focused on themselves and too little focused on whom they are to be serving. We are embarrassed, afraid, unsure – “What will they think of me?” Hopefully nothing, may their thoughts be entirely occupied with Jesus Christ.

How many gifts can we have? Do we have more than one? This is a big debate that goes on. Paul appears to be speaking only of one gift here when he talks to Timothy: he says fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. If you look at Paul’s list of qualifications – we are going to do that in a week or two or maybe three – for being an elder, when you look at those qualifications you read that in 1 Timothy 3:2 every elder is supposed to be able to teach. Teaching you have to understand, teaching in the ancient world was widely practiced and intensely admired, both by the Greeks and the Romans who had developed the skill of rhetoric and had extensive courses and study in debate and argumentation. It was equally valued by the Jews, who studied the law and wrote long commentaries and loved to argue and dispute and debate about what exactly it was the word was saying. However if we study Paul’s understanding of the church I think that it is persuasive that a key element for all that is done with true or divinely endorsed effectiveness is done “in the Spirit.” Are you doing what you do in the Spirit? So I would say that Paul is saying that all men who are called to be elders will have the Spirit given gift of teaching, or more precisely the gift of handling the word of God in order to edify others. In 2 Timothy 2:24-25 you can see the ability to interact with the opponent and be able to bring them to a place of understanding is key, it is essential if a man is going to be an elder in the life of the church. I don’t think that it is credible that Paul would imagine that is a sufficient gift or that it is the only gift. Some of the elders are supposed to be administrators over the life of the church. I would assume they have the gift of administration. So I think people are able to have more than one gift. We need more than one gift.

A gift can be neglected, but can it be used poorly? More precisely a gift can be neglected, but can it be used wrongly? Can gift be used faithlessly or for selfish ends? I am not sure I can answer this question definitively. It is hard to imagine that you could force to the Spirit of God to do something selfishly centered. That hardly seems likely. However I will say this: when one exercises a spiritual gift they develop certain skills and learn various practices and gain understandings and insights. I do. These remain even when the person turns their back on the Lord. So it is quite possible I believe that you can have people who look as if they are operating in the Holy Spirit, but in fact what they are doing is using the knowledge they gained along the way in the pursuit of their own interests, and they are dangerous. They are very dangerous people.

Let us go back again to 1 Timothy 1:18-20. It is likely there is significance that Paul refers here not simply or strictly to “gifts”, but to prophecies regarding Timothy. I think we are right to see that this is similar and parallel to the prophecy that was given to Abraham when he was called. Do we remember what happened to Abraham when he was called? How about when David was called; do we recall what happened to David when he was called? How about Paul: do we remember what happened to Paul when he was called. Today for our call to worship, the Invocation, we read about Jeremiah. Do we remember what happened to Jeremiah when he was called?

Regarding Paul, in Acts 9:15-16 the Lord says to Ananias, “[You go baptize him] *for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*” Prophecies like this, callings, define a person’s future. Oh! We do not take kindly to such an idea. Let me just say on Mother’s Day, this poses a huge challenge to the mothers of children who are called. But of course the major challenge comes to you when you are called.

It was long the predominant view that a person needed to be called to ministry. I have told my sons that over and over. I said, “Don’t think you should become a pastor because I am one.” I think I have been so persuasive that my youngest son Caleb has been fighting a terrible fight figuring out whether or not he has got it right. He is leaving at the end of this month to go plant a church in Los Angeles! Amen! This view of course has tended to fade in the modern era. When Paul speaks of the qualifications for an elder in the third chapter of First Timothy, he makes no mention of calling. There instead, if you look at 3:1, he speaks of an aspiration. “*If any man aspires to become an elder [or a bishop or an overseer, it is the same idea expressed in different ways] it is a noble thing he intends.*” It is important for us to recognize that aspirations are not necessarily calling from the Lord, though they might be. Actually aspiration may have nothing to do with calling at all. For instance a call so far from being an aspiration may be wholly unwelcome. I am referring to a place I just got to in my reading of the Old Testament. One of my favorite of all books is the one with which I probably identify most closely. Remember the man named Jonah? He was not excited about what God wanted him to do! Jonah the hapless prophet who was called by God to warn the people of Los Angeles... We are going to cover them all! So how many of us will go?

Is it not said in many cases that the best defense is an offense? Why should the church in this hostile age begin to draw back, shrink back, close ranks, tuck head and hide? Why are we not equipping ourselves? Why are we not engaged in continual prayer. Why are we not asking the Lord to anoint more and more and more of us so we go out and preach the gospel and do the works of Christ so the world can see who Christians really are, not what the media says we are? The last thing Jonah wanted was for Nineveh to escape judgment. Do we want the gay community to come to faith in Jesus Christ?

As Paul was drafted directly by the Lord, so Timothy was drafted by Paul. Whether or not the call was welcome let alone something to which either man aspired is simply not addressed in scripture. What is clear, I believe, is that a person must serve the Lord by conviction. It has to be a conviction that weighs upon him or her. It has to weigh upon them so as to hold them to the work despite difficulties and opposition. Giving up is not a live option! I talked with a couple not too long ago both of whom suffer serious physical maladies day after day after week after months after years. They still pray, they still serve, they still hope; they walk in faith. Giving up is not an option.

Conviction has to have the strength to arm you against alternate choices and temptations. As Paul already and as Timothy was finding out exercising leadership in a local church is hard work with many opportunities for unpleasant encounters: not everyone is ready for what is demanded. By the way, being a pastor of a local church also offers many opportunities for very pleasant temptations which must be constantly resisted. Not everybody is prepared to remain faithful.

I have some application [for the message]. I hope you take them seriously. The first is that you will pray for the leaders of the church, not just for me. I would appreciate if all the elders both active and currently inactive would please stand up. I would hope, and if I could I would demand that every one of these men would receive constant support in prayer by the members of this congregation. Because serving the Lord and standing tall for Him make you the object of the enemy's continual design for destruction. Every one of these men is married: therefore we need to pray for their wives as well. Thank-you men, I appreciate [your standing]. Even more I appreciate the faithful service that you give. Secondly, I am asking that you would ask the Lord whether or not He has a call on your life. If we are headed into twenty years of increasing hostility and conflict and incomprehension, it seems to me that we need to increase the army of those who know God has asked them to take up the cause and to faithfully stand against the enemy. So I think we ought to ask the question. Thirdly, ask the question whether or not you should become an elder. Fourthly pray for the nominating committee. They are at work seeking those whom God is preparing to serve.

Pray with me: our Father in heaven, You stand above time. You know the end from the beginning. We however live within the flow of days and years. We thank You our Father that through Your word illumined by the Holy Spirit, You give us glimpses of the future whereby we are comforted and strengthened in the knowledge that all things are under your control. We understand, Father, the principle that when the church grows neglectful, self-centered, selfish, it sows to the wind and we today are reaping the whirlwind. But we also believe that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. We also believe that He who is in you, the believer, is greater than he who is in the world. We also believe that You have granted to us all that is necessary for faith and life, and that the riches of the gospel are ours in full store. We with Christ will triumph. And on the day when He returns, whether we with Him in the clouds or rising from the grave or standing upon the face of the earth: we with the multitude will cry out His praises and be glad. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application: “Walking in the Spirit”, May 10th, 2015

1. Do you generally think of your personal salvation as a calling from the Lord and do you see that calling as one which entangles you in spiritual warfare?
2. Do you aspire, or aspire for your children, to be like Paul or more like Timothy?
3. To which spiritual gifts do you aspire? In what sort of ministry would you put them to use?
4. How do spiritual gifts differ from supposed “magical powers”?
5. If you were to die tonight and stand before God in heaven, what account would you give the Lord for the spiritual gifts He has given you?
6. How did the Lord’s call define the lives of Abraham, David, Paul and Timothy? How has God’s call defined the lives of some people you know?
7. Do you believe a person needs to be called to full time or vocational ministry? Do you think it is right for a person to aspire to ministry? What might be the pros and cons of this idea?
8. What challenge does the life of Jonah pose for those who believe a person needs to aspire to ministry?
9. What convictions drive you on in your Christian life? Have or are you spiritually burdened for people or situations?
10. What if anything prevents or persuades you not to take on ministry tasks or even a leadership role in the life of the church?