

A PRIVILEGE

For several reasons, it is difficult for me to preach from what are called “The Pastoral Epistles” (First and Second Timothy, and Titus). No study group has ever chosen to go through them with me. I was taught from seminary days, and in all subsequent research for years afterward, that the Pastorals were not written by Paul, but came from the hand of an admirer, probably around 130-150 A.D., when the situation and issues of the church had developed into a very different picture from anything Paul had known or concerned himself with. While I have always considered the Pastorals part of our New Testament canon and have preached from them on occasion, it is hard to give them the same weight as other New Testament writings if they have such a dubious pedigree. I tell myself they were written by serious believers and I should learn from them, but on the inside, it is hard not to wonder if, so many years later, they really understood Paul, even if they did love the memory they had of him.

In recent years, the case has been reopened and is getting stronger that perhaps Paul *did* write the Pastorals – that he survived the first Roman imprisonment and was martyred after a second Roman arrest. If that is the case, Paul’s ministry lasted seven years longer than the liberal church has assumed, and the Pastorals were written between 65 and 67 A.D., at least sixty-five years earlier than presumed. Of course, they then represent Paul’s last existing communications. I realize that such details may not affect most of you very much, but they have a strong impact on me.

It is hard to preach from First Timothy because I am so busy trying to hear it for myself that it is difficult to concentrate on what it might mean to you. I find myself listening to an old and weary, if no less faithful, Paul, whose focus and concern are no longer on his own enthusiasm and efforts, but on the leadership of third-generation Christians, like Timothy and Titus. He must know by now that his own assumptions about earthly history ending during his own lifetime are not proving out. The church is going to have to tool-up for a much longer campaign than he had at first envisioned. It is going to have to be faithful in a harsh world for much longer than he had thought. And Paul is doubtless realizing that the world is about to get even harsher for Christians – that the Roman Empire is not going to be friendly to Christianity. Paul loves athletic analogies, and running the 100-yard dash is not the same as running the marathon. What will become of

his young proteges, and what will become of the church, if this earthly Pilgrim's Way is for the long haul – for century after century – instead of just for a few years? In any case, the Pastoral Letters show concern for order and leadership and conduct clearly aimed more toward marathon running than for the 100-yard dash. Paul is no longer sure that he is at the very tail end of human history. From our perspective, he was right in the middle of our faith history, halfway between us and Abraham. But of course, we have no idea where *we* are either. As the saying goes, “If we were all *there*, we wouldn't be here.”

So in the Pastoral Letters, Paul does not speak as much of theological themes. Timothy knows them already, and long since. He is ordained – a pastor and leader in his own right – and very probably in a position of responsibility and recognized authority beyond what had existed in Paul's heyday. So Paul is reminding Timothy, and inadvertently us, to keep his eye on the ball – on Christ and His Kingdom – and to be careful about putting weight on earthly developments, which can change so quickly with every wind that blows. He warns Timothy to be careful about fads and new ideas that stray from Christ. Lock-in, get steady, stay faithful – serve the Lord while you are in the world, and never forget that the world is a fleeting moment in a far greater drama than most people realize. Paul's timeline may have been wrong, but his truth is not.

In this loving letter to his spiritual son, Paul mentions things I know I want to remember – things I nevertheless tend to forget, at least during strange interludes:

1.) We are to be content with what we have. That is, if we have food and clothing, we are grateful and content. It is straight from Jesus: “*Give us this day our daily bread.*” We never wait for a greater prosperity before being faithful and serving the Kingdom. Riches are resources and are not to be coveted or hoarded. We brought nothing into this world and we will take nothing out – at least nothing tangible. So do not get caught in Satan's grand crapshoot. That is not what it is about. That is only what Satan tries to get us to *think* it is about. It only sidetracks our real purpose and identity. Something about not being content breeds in us an attitude that cannot be faithful. Something about “the love of money” (not money itself – *the love* of money) is the root of all evil. I guess that means the desire for more and more money turns us away from what we are designed to love: our Lord, each other, truth, service, beauty, God's Kingdom.

2.) Keep making the good confession. Let your life, both individually and together, be about what you really care about. *“As for you, man of God, shun all this; aim at righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.”* “Fight the good fight,” walk the Path, stay on THE WAY. However long it takes, keep remembering who you want to be and how you want to feel when the Lord Jesus Christ appears. No matter what is happening all around you, GET CAUGHT BEING FAITHFUL.

3.) *“As for the rich in this world [that’s most of us], charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God, who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous”* NOT because that will earn their way into Heaven; who is talking here?! We are saved by faith in God’s unmerited grace. But what else would we want to do with our resources except serve our Lord, express His compassion, and spread His Message and purpose to others?

Is there any hint here that the rich should be ashamed of their resources? That they should give them all away? Is there any hint here that the rich are unfaithful by reason of their riches? Is there any hint here that the rich should be able to help all the needy, stop all poverty, and save the world by their wealth? No, there is no such hint. That’s very interesting, if these are among Paul’s last words to us. I have shown you over and over, even from the very passages most often used to prove the opposite, that Christianity does not discriminate against the rich – that Jesus does not love the rich less than others. But Christians rich or poor must be careful not to start thinking that wealth is a greater resource than it really is. Have you ever tried to help somebody with money alone? If somebody suddenly endowed our church with ten million dollars, would that automatically turn us into a more faithful church? Our culture wants to believe that you can solve almost anything if you throw enough money at it. Why else would millions of us throw ten dollars down a rat-hole called “the lottery” every week? How many times have we started thinking that more money would solve all our problems? And how many times have we wanted to believe that if we learned to pray and be faithful, the result would be earthly success? *“They think religion should yield dividends”* (paraphrasing verse 5). Why do we always want a God who is as foolish as we are? Paul adds: *“... and of course religion does yield dividends, but only to those who are content with what they have.”* Meaning, not until we focus on what really matters – our Lord and His Kingdom.

A PRIVILEGE

Faithful people use their resources for their Lord. The more faithful they become, the less they see anything they do as separate from God's Kingdom. Faithful people use their resources for their Lord. The *amount* does not change that. The amount *cannot* change that. Only becoming unfaithful can change that. Meanwhile, it is important for us to remember that throwing money at a problem is never sufficient. Money can be very useful. But only if many other things are in place – faith, vision, commitment, dedication, humility, community – can money do any real good.

Today is Stewardship Sunday. I know because it says so on my official UCC calendar. Today is also the Sunday we are supposed to be turning in our pledges and covenants. If you missed today, next week is fine. If you really hate us – want to make things as difficult as possible for us; want us to be confused and ineffective; want us to spend ten times the energy necessary on unnecessary details – then do not turn in your pledge or covenant for another six or eight weeks. If you do not choose to give any money to this church in the coming year but do *not* hate us, then for pity's sake, turn in a pledge or covenant now that says zero. We can understand that. We can plan with that. But please do not leave us in limbo. It is not nice, and it is not fair. Our church budget represents the pooled financial resources of the grateful, committed, devoted people of our faith family. You have all received a copy of the "Request Budget." That is not a "Proposed Budget" because we do not know yet what we will have to work with; you have not told us yet. The Request Budget merely tells you what the leaders of this church would like to do with some money if they had it. After you all tell us what you plan to give, we will come back to you before the Annual Meeting with a *Proposed* Budget that shows our best guess about the best way to use the money we really expect to have. If you agree, we run with it. If you do not, we change it.

Those are the practices. Back to reality: Church life is not about the budget. The budget is about the church's LIFE. Trying to raise a budget is letting the tail wag the dog. Faithful people dedicate resources to their church because they want it to serve, honor, and worship Jesus Christ in the world. We want it to help us on our pilgrimage, and we want it to draw other people into the LIFE and love and WAY that Jesus invites us into. What we each give out of love and gratitude, we pool. From that, we make a budget so that we can proceed in some order, hoping we can be effective in our mutual endeavors to serve Christ.

But spiritual principles good for individual Christians are good for the church too. Lots of churches do not seem to know that, or at least do not take it to heart. If it is good for the individual members to tithe, then it is good for the church to tithe. If it is good for individual Christians to be content with what the Lord provides, why is it not good for churches to be content with what the Lord provides through His faithful people? How dare the church go out “raising money” as if it were some secular business venture! If our people do not care, if they do not love God, if they do not long to give their resources to the church because they believe it serves the Kingdom, then it does not matter how much money the church has – it will do Jesus no good whatsoever. The same holds true for the individual. If you do not *want* to give money to the church – if it does not well-up within you as a desire, a hunger, a gratitude that makes you want to help and bless the faith community you are part of – then please, do not give! Wait for the longing to rise within you. It is spiritually damaging to give for the wrong reason – to give against your inner wisdom. It is also a lie. Gifts to the church are supposed to be love offerings, the tribute of allegiance, the tithe of blessings returned in genuine gratitude. It is never a good idea to lie to God. Lies keep things confused; they keep things trying to run on the wrong principles. Lies prevent us from learning, and ultimately they destroy trust and love. Satan has long been known as the Father of Lies. It is never a good idea to lie to God.

By the way, a tithe is not just any amount you give to the church. A tithe is ten percent of your usable income. If you can get your hands on it – if you can spend it in any way, it is usable income. If you cannot get your hands on it – for instance, because it goes into a retirement fund – then it will come to you later. So you wait and tithe on it later, when it comes to you. There is no need to lie to God. God does not want your money if you do not want to give it. On the other hand, let’s not play cutesy games with important concepts. Then we are lying to *ourselves*. The truth is, if we move earnestly toward tithing to our church, then our church’s income will always exceed our Request Budget. The truth is, if we do not become a tithing church, we will never be able to do a lot of the things we know a faithful community of Christians would be doing. We do not always find ourselves where we know we ought to be, but it is nice to know where we are and to be who we are. God can always take it from there. *Pretending* is not the same as *walking* the Christian WAY.

I have told you in the past about tithing as gratitude. The following year I told you about tithing as allegiance. Today I want to talk about tithing as a privilege. Some of you will not be at all impressed, because you still think I am just trying to raise money – trying to get you to give. You have run into that motive often enough in the past, and I could hardly blame you for assuming it is my motive too. But if that is what you think, it means you cannot hear me. So I hope you will come next week, and we will talk about other things.

To the rest of you I say: It is really a wonderful day when the fuzz clears and we realize that giving to God is a great privilege. First of all, it is:

I.) THE PRIVILEGE OF WORSHIP

To be allowed to give to God – to give to One so great and have it received – is that not a great marvel? An earthly king would not accept just any old gift from just any person. Even my own wife will not receive every gift I try to bring her. Sometimes she even takes it without receiving it. But that is a big and dangerous subject. Let's go back to an imaginary king. Suppose you were selected to go as a representative of your community to have an audience with the king. You all know that you would never go to any such occasion empty-handed. You do not even go to a Christmas party empty-handed. So how much thought would you put into selecting an appropriate gift? It would be a very big deal, wouldn't it? You would think and ponder and talk to other people. And when you finally settled on what the gift should be, you would take great care to make sure it was made really well, out of the finest material you could come up with. And you would choose the best craftsman you knew to make it. And then, having done everything possible to make it a worthy and special gift, you would be anxious for days, until the very moment of presentation – anxious for fear that the king might not like it. What if he turned up his nose or waved it away, or even just looked at it with disdain and went on with the agenda as if you were not worth noticing?

To be allowed to give a gift to One who is greater than we are is a great privilege. If the gift is received, it lifts us into a new category of importance. I am not talking about how things *should* be; I am talking about how things *are*. If you give a gift, even to another human, and they receive it, that changes your status. Neither of you will say it in words, but you both know it. You are in a new position with that person.

What does God *need* from you? Absolutely nothing! “*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*” Remember? So if God allows you the blessing – allows you the privilege of giving him gifts and then receives your gifts – it is proof of new status, of new worth, of bond, of approval and caring. The Genesis story says God received the gift that Abel brought, but Cain’s gift he did not receive. So Cain ends up in the land of Nod, east of Eden. You think that story is over and done with? It is a great privilege to be allowed to give to God – it is a great miracle when our gifts are received. It is the privilege of worship. Some of you have maybe assumed that all gifts offered to God are always and automatically received. But that is far from the truth. Gifts that we ourselves know are unworthy are not received. And lots of us have places and memories of blight in our lives to prove it.

II.) THE PRIVILEGE OF PARTNERSHIP

One of the great principles of LIFE with God is that giving God gifts turns us into partners with God. We become, in some fashion, teammates, despite the enormous inequality. If God makes a dime from every dollar you make, then God is obviously a partner in your business. It is an acknowledgment that God is an investor and a stockholder in YOU – and in whatever it is you are trying to accomplish or produce. We can fake it, pretend it, try to think our way into a right attitude that will simulate it. But if the deal is made and we know it and God knows it – like in Jacob’s story, “*of everything thou givest me, I will give a tenth to thee*” – then something changes in us. From now on, in a clearer, more concrete way, we will try to bless God – and God will try to bless us.

It is a privilege to be partners with God. Some people think it is wonderful to be able to work for yourself. It is even more wonderful to know that you work for One far greater than yourself. It is one of the most wonderful things in the world to know that all day, every day, your efforts and decisions, your failures and successes, your profits and losses – are all shared with God. And not just in some vague, hypothetical or theoretical way, but in your reality.

I do so wish we would all stop giving gifts, not only to God but to anybody, that we do not really mean – that we do not really *want* to give. It would transform the entire world! Can you imagine? Of course, it is not going to happen out in the world. The world is full of mendacity; it would rather pretend than be real. But in the faith community, we can be different if we dare.

A PRIVILEGE

I don't know about you, but I never resent paying somebody who is good at what they do. I do not like to be cheated or defrauded, but a good and honest auto mechanic is a treasure, and I never resent his bill. I do not want a special deal; I want to pay him a fair wage because I want him to be there the next time I need him. It is a privilege to give value for value. It is clean and it is honorable. And it is hard to find such things in our world.

I love it when I come upon an idea for a really good gift for Mariana or my children. I plan it, get all excited, and have a hard time keeping it a secret until the right moment. And of course, I often have to plan in order to have the resources to make the gift possible. But I never ever remember resenting the expenditure of those resources. It is a huge pleasure – a great privilege – to give such gifts. I would be bereft if they were unwilling to receive my gifts. That is not theory talking. That is experience.

But gifts to my Lord Christ – to my God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ – who am I that my Lord should receive anything I have to offer? The miracle and mystery is that sometimes – not always, but sometimes – what I offer is received. Is there some joy or privilege in this LIFE greater than that? If so, I have never heard of it.