

THE FIRST LETTER OF PAUL TO TIMOTHY

(09/01/19)

Scripture Lesson: Selections from 1 Timothy

1:1-7; 2:1-15; 3:1-13; 4:4, 11-16; 5:23; 6:1-2, 11-19

“Do not neglect the gift that is in you.” (1 Timothy 4:14)

Over the next few weeks we will be looking at some little-known books of the Bible. The two Letters from Paul to Timothy and his Letter to Titus form a distinct section within the collection of so-called Pauline Letters. They have been referred to as the Pastoral Letters because of their concern with pastoral oversight of the early Christian churches.

Biblical criticism has made us aware of a problem with regard to these letters. The letters claim to be from Paul and are listed in our Bible as The Letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus, but biblical scholars doubt that they were written by Paul. Textual criticism, which is an examination of the language, including specific words that are used in the letters, reveals that their vocabulary and style differ in many ways from Paul’s authenticated letters. With regard to their theology, key concepts such as faith, law, and righteousness are treated quite differently from the way Paul uses them in his other letters, while a new emphasis on godliness, sound teaching, church order, and good works appears.

With regard to the content of the letters, the historical situations that these letters describe do not fit with what we know of Paul’s life and missionary travels. Though some biblical scholars have suggested that perhaps a secretary wrote the letters from Paul’s sketchy notes, or that a later author crafted them around fragments of letters actually written by Paul, the most reasonable argument seems to be that we just do not know who wrote them. In these letters, an unknown author uses Paul’s name to give authority to his attempt to address problems that he was confronting in some post-Pauline churches.

Just as we do not know the identity of the author, we also do not know the persons to whom the letters are addressed. Even though they claim to be addressed to Timothy and Titus, fellow workers with Paul, biblical scholars have determined that they were definitely not written to the historical Timothy or Titus. The letters could have been written to any of the churches in the Pauline mission field, though the frequent references to people associated with Ephesus make the church in Ephesus a strong possibility.

With regard to the date that these letters were written, we note that the author seems to know the Book of Acts (2 Timothy 3.11), which was probably written around 80-90 C.E., so they had to be written after that. It has also been noted that Polycarp, the early church bishop, alludes to these letters in his Letter to the Philippians, which was written between 125-135 C.E. The letters were thus probably written early in the second century, proving conclusively that they could not have been written by Paul.

With regard to the “false teachings” that these letters address, the heresies are denounced in stock terms and the heretical teachings are not carefully described or debated. It seems that the offensive teaching contained a mixture of Jewish, Gnostic, and ascetic elements, and that they threatened the theological and social fabric of the church, especially regarding the role of women (2 Tim 3.6-7 and Titus 1.11). This raises the possibility that the false teaching that is attacked in these letters might have advocated a more equal role for women in the church, a position that would have been deemed radical for that time and which was quickly denounced by the writer.

So here we have a set of letters presumably written by Paul, but which were not written by Paul, addressed to someone named “Timothy” and “Titus,” but who were not the historical Timothy and Titus. The letters address certain problems in church organization and ministry which did not appear until a later date than Paul’s ministry. Yet these books, these letters are included in the Bible. Let us see if we can determine why.

But first let me explain why I have provided you with what most of you probably consider to be TMI (too much information). In addition to helping us understand these letters, these books of the Bible, biblical criticism shows us that the belief that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, unquestioned truth for all time, is an untenable belief. As you know, I believe the Bible is meant to be a guidebook, not a rule book; it is meant to be taken seriously, not literally. The failure to grasp this, not only in our religion but in every religion, can lead to religious fanaticism, which I believe is not only a major problem in our time but has been a major problem for humanity throughout the past several millennia.

Following up on this theme, let’s begin by taking a look at some of the reasons why one might *not* take these letters seriously. 1 Timothy 2:8-15 tells us:

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or

expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

The argument about Adam preceding Eve and thus having power over her is a little sketchy, as is the argument that women can be saved through childbearing. Another difficult part of 1 Timothy to reconcile with the Christian faith is the directive urging slaves to obey and respect their masters. Nowadays we know that slavery is wrong, that to own another human being is evil, and that slaves do not owe respect and obedience to their masters.

However, there are also some gems in this little book. I bet you didn't know that the saying "We brought nothing into this world, and we cannot take anything out of it" appears in 1 Timothy 6.7. Did you know that the saying, "the love of money is the root of all evil" is from 1 Timothy 6.10? Note that the author says that the *love* of money is the root of all evil, not money itself. I think we could make a case that greed, not money, is indeed at the root of all evil. I also like verse 5.24, which tells us that we are permitted to imbibe just a little for our stomach and other ailments. Actually, this directive was intended to combat the ascetic heresy, the denial of all pleasures, the mortification of the flesh as the way to spiritual perfection. The ascetic believes that pain is good, and pleasure is bad; spirit is good, and flesh is bad; mind is good, and body is bad; sacred is good, and secular is bad. To counter this distorted theological position, the writer of 1 Timothy tells us that is ok to drink scotch every once in a while. (This, admittedly is a loose and self-serving translation.)

The first chapter of 1 Timothy tells us that the aim of our instruction in the church is the love "that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith." *The aim of our instruction in the church is love.* How often we forget this, both in our teaching and in our action. How often the church, in its judgment of people, even its own members, inflicts great pain on them. We need to remember from the teachings of Jesus that *it is all about love!*

The second chapter of 1 Timothy tells us that we should pray for *all people*, including kings and heads of state, that "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for *everyone*." On my pilgrimage through Tibet, this was one of the dimensions of the Buddhist faith that touched me deeply. When a Buddhist spins his/her prayer wheel, he/she is praying for

everyone in the world. The prayer flags that blow in the wind are sending out prayers for all sentient beings. Their faith, their spirituality leads the Buddhist outward to the world in loving prayer, just as our Christian faith leads us outward to the world in prayer and ministry. This is one of the reasons why I believe that the two faiths have so much in common.

The Tibetans have been criticized for not staging a guerrilla war against the Chinese, making them pay dearly for their occupation. I have just finished reading a book that suggests that if the Tibetans' armed resistance were taken up by other oppressed ethnic groups and the pro-democracy factions, the Chinese government might be destabilized to the point where they will have to retreat from Tibet. The author expressed his frustration that the Dalai Lama is apparently unwilling to consider this option because of his commitment to nonviolence.

The Dalai Lama prays for the Chinese. This sounds a lot like what Jesus told us to do, to pray for our enemies. Actually, if you saw what a steady dose of atheistic materialism can do a person's or a nation's soul, what cruelty it has allowed the Chinese to perpetrate on the Tibetans, other ethnic minorities, and its own citizens who are seeking democracy, you would want to pray for the Chinese. They may have gained control of a piece of land, but they have lost their soul in the process. The Tibetan Buddhists do not harbor a hatred of the Chinese. To be sure they want their country back. They want to be free to develop their own culture and practice their own religion. But they are not consumed with hatred. In the midst of mass executions, imprisonments, and torture, the beautiful light of their religious faith shines through.

The third chapter of The First Letter of Paul to Timothy, the chapter describing the qualifications of bishops, deacons, and women in the church, speaks to those of us who are called to leadership positions in the church. The author tells us,

Now a bishop must be above all reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money.

Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons.

It seems clear that the author of this letter knew the important connection between our personal qualities, the way we live our personal life, and the way we carry out our positions of

leadership in the church. He tells Timothy that, as a minister, he must set an example by the way he lives his life. He tells him,

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God.

Passages like these make this letter a timeless document. It tells us we are called to a life of love, and that this is the aim of our preaching and our teaching. It tells us we are called to a life of intercessory prayer for all people. It tells us that how we live our life is important. It calls us to reaffirm what the author calls *the mystery of our faith*. And it calls us

to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for ourselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that we may take hold of the life that is really life.

What a beautiful prayer: that we may “take hold of the life that is *really* life.”

In the 4th chapter of this letter, the author says something that should resonate with us. He tells us that “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected.” This is a powerful statement. It reminds us not to look down on people who are different from us. It speaks to people who have been taught to hate themselves, who have become filled with self-loathing. If this speaks to you, remember this verse: “Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected.” This applies to *you* as well as your brothers and sisters!

Finally, in 1 Timothy 4:14, the writer of this letter tells his listener, “Do not neglect the gift that is in you.” What a beautiful statement! *Do not neglect the gift that is in you*. I think the writer is saying that each of us not only *has* a special gift within us; we *are* that gift. Each and every one of us is a unique incarnation of God. The author tells us that this special gift, the gift of our soul or the gift of the Holy Spirit within us, should not be neglected. The gift needs to be nourished. It needs to be strengthened. It needs to be placed in the center of our life. This is what we seek to do in prayer, in worship, and in sharing the Sacrament of Holy Communion. And this is the precious gift that we are called to share with the world.

May the Lord bless our understanding of this pastoral letter, that, as of old, it may bring inspired words of instruction and guidance to us as individuals and to our church. Amen.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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