

Sermon
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Is the Treasure Worth the Trouble?
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Let's begin at the end.

According to 2 Timothy 1:14, the last verse of our 2nd reading, Paul instructs Timothy to "guard the good treasure" that has been entrusted to him, and to do with the help of the Holy Spirit.

This seems clear enough, right?

Timothy – and by extension, each of us – must protect the good news that God has communicated to us in Jesus Christ, presumably against false doctrine or teaching.

But what is this good news?

Is it the message that Christ died for our sins?

Or is it, as we read in v. 9, that God has embraced us in Christ from the beginning, "before the ages began"?

These are challenging questions!

Yet beyond them lies the most challenging question of all: is the treasure in 1st and 2nd Timothy, worth the trouble?

Three Stumbling Blocks

Let me explain what I mean by the question, Is the treasure worth the trouble?

1st and 2nd Timothy are controversial. We know (thanks to a variety of clues in text) that both were written toward the end of the first century by someone *other* than Paul.

We also know that the church debated the inclusion of 1st and 2nd Timothy in the New Testament up through the end of the 2nd century, roughly a hundred years after they were originally written.

And we know that these two letters contain passages that cause some of us, including me, to stumble.

Consider the effect 1st Timothy 2:11-15 has had on Christian women throughout the centuries:

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.

Or consider how 2 Timothy 3:16, which says that “all Scripture is inspired,” has been twisted into “proof” that the Bible contains within all of its 66 books not a single error since “God wrote it.”

Or consider, finally, some of the most corrupt leaders in world history as you hear 1 Timothy 2:2, which says that we should pray and give thanks “for kings and all who are in high positions.” Should we, therefore, express our gratitude for someone like Vladimir Putin, a man of extraordinarily “high position” who is nevertheless responsible for the death of innocent men, women, and children throughout the Ukraine?

For any thoughtful and reflective follower of Christ, each of these passages should raise red flags: is the “good treasure” in 1st and 2nd Timothy worth the trouble? Or should we, as Martin Luther once advised, stick to those books of the Bible like Romans, Galatians, 1 Peter, and Ephesians that most effectively lead us to Christ and teach us everything necessary to know for our salvation (Lull, ed., *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2004 (pp. 111-112)?

Do 1st and 2nd Timothy, in short, belong in the trash or does the treasure they contain justify their keeping?

The Approach

Now obviously as an ordained pastor who has pledged fidelity to the Bible as the “norm” or guide of his faith, I am not going to urge anyone to throw out 1st Timothy, 2nd Timothy, or any other writing of the New Testament.

Even Luther, who famously referred to James as a letter of straw, “shrank,” as the great Reformation historian Roland Bainton puts it, from “demolishing the canon” by excluding writings he considered unhelpful to ordinary readers.

“The pope, the councils, and the Canon law might go,” Bainton says of Luther’s perspective, “but to tamper with the traditional selection of the holy writings was one step too far” (*The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 45-46).

Accordingly, then, I will argue that, yes, the treasure of the Timothy’s ultimately overrides the trouble they cause.

But the approach (to cite a line from *Star Wars*) will not be easy.

We must first clear aside or at least address the stumbling blocks I have already mentioned: the disparaging attitude 1st Timothy takes toward women; the “proof” 2nd Timothy supposedly provides regarding the infallibility of Scripture; and the license 2nd Timothy apparently gives to kings and other people in authority to act however they please, knowing that we will pray and support them no matter what.

Second, if we are to guard the “good treasure” 2 Timothy 1:14 mentions, we have to determine *what it is*.

Third and finally, having addressed the three stumbling blocks I mentioned, and having defined the meaning of the “good treasure” God calls us to protect, each of us must ask ourselves, Am I up to the task? What can *I do* to ensure that others hear the gospel that has been entrusted to me?

This means we have a little work ahead of us, so let’s ask God for help and pray:

Good and gracious God, open our ears this morning to the hearing of your gospel. Give us the power to know, trust, and believe in what Ephesians 1:13 calls your “word of truth,” that is, “the gospel of your salvation,” through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Clearing Aside the Obstacles

Last week we discussed five misconceptions about the Bible in our adult forum. The first of these is that Paul is a misogynist because of what he said about women needing to keep quiet according to 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

This seems strange for Paul to say.

For one thing, he proclaimed that all people are one in Christ, Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (see Galatians 3:28).

For another, he counted as “prominent among the apostles” and co-workers in Christ a variety of women throughout his original letters, including Romans.

Why, then, would he say something so *contradictory* about women in 1 Timothy? Well, as biblical scholars have been saying for nearly 200 years now, Paul probably didn’t write it. More likely, a loyal disciple or student of Paul’s attributed it to him.

Even a cursory glance at our second reading shows the plausibility of such a claim.

According to v. 5, the faith that Timothy inherited, presumably now a young man who can read, has existed for three generations. If we take a generation to mean 15 to 20 years, that would put the composition of 2nd Timothy in the last quarter of the first century, somewhere between 75 and 90 AD. (This assumes the first generation of believers in Paul’s church’s started somewhere in the mid-to-late 30s, after Jesus died and after Paul accepted him as the messiah.)

But here’s the problem: modern biblical scholars agree with Christian tradition that Paul died somewhere in the early-to-mid 60s. The great apostle accordingly *could not have written the letter*.

We have other clues in the text as well.

Notice in v. 13 the reference to “sound teaching” or “doctrine.” This implies that the core views of the early Christians had time to crystalize into doctrines defended by the church. Such language, interestingly enough, appears only in later-letters most scholars believe Paul did not write: Ephesians, 1st Timothy, 2nd Timothy, and Titus.

Consider, finally, how “Paul” in 1st Timothy blames Eve for the introduction of sin into the world. “For Adam was formed first,” we read, “then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (2:13-14). Go back to what Paul writes in Romans 5:12, which no scholar disputes as authentic, and we learn that sin entered the world not through Eve but through *Adam*.

Recognizing that Paul himself did not insist that women should be silent or that women brought sin into the world should address our first concern about Timothy.

In contrast to Paul, 1st and 2nd Timothy arose in the context of an increasingly institutionalized church near the end of the first century, one where men asserted their authority over women, perhaps because they were anxious about some of the women speaking up in church.

The original spirit of the Christian faith, at least as we see it in Paul, seems to have been far more egalitarian.

So, what about the second stumbling block I mentioned? Is the Bible without error in matters of faith, human history, *and* science because “all Scripture is inspired” according to 2 Timothy 3:16?

Here again we have to put the text in context.

Assuming Timothy was written near the end of the first century, the author would be referring to a much smaller collection of Scripture than what we have in the Bible now, namely, the law and the prophets, which is about 2/3 of the Old Testament (see Romans 3:21).

The rest of the books, including the last third of the Old Testament as well as all the books of the New, had not been officially selected yet.

To say, moreover, that these texts were inspired or “God-breathed” literally means they were given life and thus give life, not that God dictated every word to the authors of Scripture like He dictated every word of the Qu’ran to Mohammed according to Muslim belief.

No, for Christians, Christ himself is the Word of God, the Word made flesh (John 1:14). The Bible, in pointing us to him, is the Word of God only in a secondary sense, as the 20th century theologian Karl Barth maintains.

And what about the last of our three concerns, that we should (according to 1 Timothy 2:2) pray and give thanks for “everyone,” including “kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity”? Does that mean we should give thanks for Vladimir Putin?

The simple answer, I believe, is no. Why? Again, we have to read the text in context. The goal of such praise, it would seem, is to be *left alone* by the governing authorities. It’s a survival-strategy for Christians living in the midst of periodic persecution.

Why draw attention to ourselves, the thinking seems to be, by outwardly criticizing or condemning people in positions of power? Better to pray for them so as not to attract attention to ourselves. That way, we may indeed lead the “quiet and peaceable life” to which God has called us.

Of course, we may not agree with the strategy employed by the author of 1st Timothy to prevent the persecution of his fellow Christians, especially when times demand that we stand up to the injustices of the state. But at least we can empathize. These people suffered for their faith. Why should they suffer more if it can be avoided?

Now that we have addressed the trouble with 1st and 2nd Timothy, let’s see if we can recover its treasure. What is the meaning of the “good treasure” we are supposed to protect, and are we up to the task?

The Good Treasure

Fortunately, the author makes it simple.

Take a look at vv. 9-10. There we read neither that Christ was born for us, nor that he died for us. Instead, we see the essence of the good news insofar as he *overcame death* for us purely out of love.

“This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”

Do you hear that?

The Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible tells us that “love is as strong as death” (8:6), but in Christ love is *stronger* than death. Love conquers death. Love wins!

Suddenly, the entire New Testament joins in a unanimous chorus. “Remember Jesus Christ, *raised from the dead*, a descendant of David – that is my gospel,” the author of 2nd Timothy subsequently tells us (2:8; emphasis mine).

“Death has been swallowed up in victory,” the Apostle Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 15:54-55. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

“For I am convinced,” the same Apostle states in Romans 8:38, “that nothing” – not even death – “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

“[For] if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God *raised him from the dead*,” Paul concludes, “you will be saved” (Romans 10:9; emphasis mine).

This message is the “good treasure” that has been entrusted to each of us: we know not what dreams may come, but we trust that death will not have the last word.

To each of you this morning who has or who will lose someone close – a spouse, a mother, a father, a best friend, a sibling, a son, a son-in-law – the message seems clear: death will not be the end.

You, your loved one, even that “tiresome incarnation, your neighbor” will somehow be transformed, raised as Christ was. That’s the message, the “gospel of our salvation,” but here’s its secret: that transformation in you has *already* begun.

Are You Up to the Task?

You remember the last of my three questions, right?

Now that we have set aside our trouble with Timothy, and now that we have defined and recovered the “good treasure” in Timothy, what can we do to ensure that others hear the gospel that has been entrusted to us?

The answer is simple: live the resurrection-life.

Each of us has died to ourselves through baptism in Christ.

We have, as Paul says, “been crucified with Christ, [so that] it is no longer [we] who live, but it is Christ who lives in [us]” (Galatians 2:19-20). Indeed, as a friend of mine who is a Zen priest likes to put it, only the ego wants to get into heaven.

Lose your ego, become selfless, and you will begin to taste the immortality promised by the gospel.

What does this look like?

Just imagine a day in life where death has truly lost its sting, where the promise of new life overrides your sorrow, your fear, or your deepest grief. Set aside your doubts and let that be yours for a single moment.

What absolute treasure, surely the kind that makes Timothy worth the trouble.

Amen.