

Equipped for Every Good Work

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

⁴¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ² proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵ As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

I think I mentioned that I recently participated in First Aid training. The taught us to check out the situation before rushing in to help. One thing is to check out the warning instructions if any substance is involved. Like a warning message in small print on the back of a cleaning solution bottle, these verses from the Pastoral Epistle are last-minute instructions for Christians. In case of an emergency, follow these directions: proclaim the message, be persistent, convince, rebuke, and encourage. This portion of 2 Timothy is packed with direct imperatives, succinct Christian teaching, and an urgent call to action that we do not enjoy hearing. It creates a sense that we have not done all we have been instructed to do. We have not been vigilantly sharing the gospel 24-7. These statements sound so terse and definitive; they practically squeeze the joy out of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Few of us are called to be street-corner preachers or see ourselves as evangelists of any kind. Unfortunately, many of us do not witness about our faith, and into this vacuum come dazzling messages. We are surprised when our relatives and friends join religious groups whose doctrines we know little about...but we didn't witness to them.

In what could also be called an evangelist's job description, we are reminded of what is central to our faith and our calling as a priesthood of all believers: salvation is through

faith in Christ Jesus. This central truth does not need to be reinvented every time we share our faith. As Christians, we place the gospel in the context in which we minister and let it grow. We proclaim the gospel we know. The author of this letter to Timothy does not put a new and fancy twist on the gospel in order to get Timothy's attention, nor is it dressed up or watered down. He stresses the sacred Scriptures, the oral tradition of the gospel, and sound doctrine. There is no argument about the method of baptism or whether or not male Christians need to be circumcised or whether we need to obey dietary laws. The verses place value on the oral tradition while acknowledging the sacred writings—Scripture—are inspired by God for the building up of God's people.

In these postmodern times, there are plenty of inspired teachers writing books and offering seminars on spiritual matters. The gospel can get buried among the "new" messages. Books such as *The Purpose-Driven Life*, *The Four Agreements*, *The Secret*, *The Prayer of Jabez*, and *A New Earth: Awakening Your Life's Potential* create a frenzy of excitement with their promises of a "new" being, a "new" start. In fact, some churches and members study these books alongside the Bible. The desire for something new, like a spiritual fix or wisdom from on high, is part of what makes us human, and it is evident in every generation. As human beings we have a hunger, a thirst, a passion for what will inspire us and lift us out of the mundane, the ordinary.

Is it possible that through these teachers or teachings we are educated, convinced, rebuked, and encouraged in our faith? Is it possible that these books are reaching a group of people who do not attend church and never will? Is it possible that while these books offer a certain spin on the gospel, our job is to help make the connection between them and faith in Jesus Christ through which our salvation comes? When we place our faith in the latest book on Oprah's list, we will always be waiting for the next "new" message to come along and save us. Even though we seek the new and novel, it is God's grace that satisfies our longings. This is the sound doctrine that is referred to in this letter to Timothy.

The good news is that though we wander, though we turn away from the truth, though we seek other paths, our salvation has been accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Ultimately, this is a very comforting passage of Scripture when we unravel it in such a way that we accept the warning label for what it is and remember the front of the bottle—the grace of the gospel—"by grace you have been saved" (Eph. 2:5). Despite our faithlessness, God will always be there for us. Presented earlier in 2 Timothy 2:13 is a litany that claimed God cannot deny who God is. As this letter urges, read the sacred writings and find the people of God wandering away or rebelling against God, even so boldly as to say, "let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel" (Isa. 30:11). Stories of wandering and returning are throughout Scripture, and we can see our lives reflected in these biblical characters.

Think of Jacob, the heel grabber and crook who through his dirty deals becomes Israel, the one who struggles with God and prevails. Think of David, when Nathan is sent to confront his adultery. Once David acknowledges his sin, the Lord puts it away and David does not die; there are consequences for his behavior, but he has a second chance. Think of the prodigal son, who is welcomed home after he has spent his inheritance. Think of Zacchaeus, condemned by his community as a greedy tax collector, but recognized by Jesus for his latent generosity. Think of the woman at the well, who has five husbands, but Jesus sees in her a hunger and thirst for living water. Think of Peter, who acts like a brave disciple but later denies Jesus when Jesus faces the cross. Jesus takes a risk. Peter's confession of faith becomes the rock upon which the church is built. Jesus is able to see potential in people that we may not see ourselves.

Along with Scripture we have several hymns in our collective history that offer this story of grace in the face of our wandering hearts and itching ears: "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," "Wherever I May Wander," and a Lenten hymn, "O God, How We Have Wandered." In singing, we confess,

O to grace how great a debtor daily I am called to be! Let thy goodness, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to thee. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God

I love; here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above. **Olive Elaine**

Hinnant

Paul reminds Timothy to learn from the witness of the people of the faith. He is to learn from their experience and insights as they have lived their faith and shared it with the church. It is their instruction, their model of fidelity and insight, to which Timothy is urged to turn.

Not only is Timothy directed to remember and respect his teachers, he is also instructed to follow "the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:15). He was to learn from the Hebrew Scriptures that would have been a part of Timothy's religious nurture; and presumably the letters of Paul would have been considered sacred writings (see 2 Pet. 3:15-16). Timothy was to learn from some Greek works of wisdom as sacred writings. These equip us for every good work! We have "learned and firmly believed" and we should know its source—from whom we have learned the teaching or in which writing it had appeared. The epistle's author distinguishes Scripture as inspired by God. The author recognizes the human element in the writing of Scripture, while noting the divine inspiration that informs the process of writing Scripture.

Timothy was urged and we are urged to be consistent and persistent in proclaiming the gospel, regardless of "whether the time is favorable or unfavorable" (4:2). In so doing, he is instructed to exercise "the utmost patience in teaching" (4:2), which should be oriented toward the multiple purposes of building up the body of Christ and enabling members and acquaintances to identify and use their many gifts. The gifts of the faithful Christian include patience, persistence, and consistency; gifts that must be cultivated in the soil of suffering, in the process of chaining one's desires for the sake of submitting fully to God's demands for Christian witness (2:9). In this manner the author summarizes the guidance to Timothy as a Christian witness with the mandate to "always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully" (4:5). Be assured that God has equipped you for the work! **Joseph L. Price**

10/29/19

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Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 4:
Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).