

Morning Worship Services

Sunday, August 10, 2008

“Stepping Stones Along the Pathway of Obedience: Caring for Those in Need”

1 Timothy 5:1-25

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A few weeks ago, guest speakers began sharing a sermon series from 1 Timothy entitled “Stepping Stones Along the Pathway of Obedience.”

During these weeks, we’ve taken some time to “listen in” on a written conversation between the Apostle Paul and his son in the faith, Timothy. It’s the kind of conversation that comes from a wiser older man—who has labored long and hard at a task—and now takes the time to share with a younger man. And, not just any younger man, but a younger man who he believes may well have to, some day soon, take his place.

Paul, you see, was currently in Macedonia. Very soon he would find himself under arrest and on his way to Rome. As a Roman citizen, a very rare status for someone of Paul’s heritage, Paul would exercise the right to request a hearing in Rome to answer the charges brought against him.

Some folks of significance would accuse Paul of promoting anti-government ideas. Actually, Paul was simply urging people to become citizens of Christ’s Kingdom. Some thought this was most inappropriate. The best way to silence Paul: have him arrested.

Of course, in hindsight, we can look on these events as they unfolded and see the Hand of God taking charge of the situation. God would use this seemingly dire occurrence to move Paul to Rome at the government’s expense. This would then allow Paul to minister to the growing church there. Out of that experience, the exponential growth of the numbers of people who would place their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ would eventually cause Christianity to propagate throughout the then known world.

So, Paul writes to Timothy, who he has left in Ephesus, a city on the western coast of the land we now call Turkey. He gives this young man instruction in how to devote himself effectively to the cause of serving the Lord Jesus Christ.

You may wonder what in the world such instructions might have to do with you. “After all,” you may say, “I have quite enough to do right now just trying to make my way through this troubled world. Why I have hassles at work; hassles at home; and even hassles here at Church. At least whenever I try to accomplish something that I believe God has laid on my heart, it seems way harder than it ought to be.”

But you see, dear one, that’s exactly the point.

When you heard the soft whispering—or the loud shouting—of the Holy Spirit that penetrated your mind and heart, and when you responded by receiving God’s gift of eternal life through the transforming power of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, you joined the “Jesus Gang.” You became a part of Christ’s Kingdom, not in the “sweet by and by,” but in the here and now.

It’s just possible that some of the problems that Timothy faced in Ephesus might well be the same kind of problems that you will face in Erie. In fact, your brothers and sisters in Christ up in Buffalo, or over in

Cleveland, or down in Pittsburgh, or even in Harborcreek, or Millcreek, or Fairview, or wherever you live, have to face these same kinds of problems, as they labor on behalf of Christ and His Kingdom.

In our passage today, Paul concentrates on relationships within the Body of Christ. Paul grabs Timothy's attention and tries to guide his thinking on how to deal with issues that will surely arise, as he leads the church in Ephesus.

Paul has already acknowledged in the previous chapter that Timothy has his youth as a potential liability. And, he urges Timothy to not allow anyone to despise him—or set aside what Timothy may say—simply because he is young.

Now in this chapter, Paul sharpens Timothy's focus on developing a level of caring that will appropriately mark his ministry among the Ephesians. Part of the solution to problem solving within the Church, Paul asserts, is to care appropriately for one's fellow believers.

If I were to try to put into a sentence what Paul shares with Timothy, it might sound something like this: "Thoughtfully and prayerfully building respectful, caring relationships with fellow believers, helps expose the world to the power of Christ within His children."

Let me say that again. "Thoughtfully and prayerfully building respectful, caring relationships with fellow believers, helps expose the world to the power of Christ within His children."

Let's take a look at four very specific Principles that form the basis for what Paul has to say.

Principle No. 1 (verses 1 and 2): "When making a point with someone, speak respectfully. Let the deep kind of God-breathed love temper your words. Speak as if you were speaking to your father, or mother, or sister, or brother."

Right off the bat with this first Principle we enter a realm in our modern culture where listeners respond with a universal, "Huh?"

In our culture, we're just not in the habit of extending respect to other people. And, our culture particularly doesn't extend respect to older people. In fact, our culture has pretty much relegated anyone who has reached his or her senior years to a position seen as virtually irrelevant on every level.

I mean, after all, come on, older people are set in their ways, always living in the past, always talking about the good old days, always trying to get you to move backward, not forward; always resisting change.

Hey! Wait a minute. I'm one of those older people! Last Tuesday, I celebrated my 61st birthday. I'm set in my ways. I'm living in the past. I'm always talking about the good old days. I'm always resisting change.

Our culture does not generally respect what older people have to say. And, the truth is that, just like people of all ages, older people can find themselves stuck on this idea or that one. Sometimes being stuck on a particular idea stands in the way of valid progress, or valid action.

Nevertheless, Paul instructs Timothy to speak respectfully and with God-breathed love to the older men he might encounter.

When it comes to dealing with women, Paul urges Timothy to treat older women as he would treat his mother and to treat younger women as he would treat his sister. Notice how Paul emphasizes that, in his relationship with younger women, Timothy must maintain purity.

Purity. Now there's a concept that our culture would never support. Why I could spend the rest of today, all day tomorrow, and most of Tuesday talking about issues of purity among members of opposite gender within the church. Everything from the way we dress to the way we speak. But, I think I will leave that for another time.

Paul knew that Timothy might encounter some resistance from the people in his congregation in Ephesus, so he offered him a key: "speak kindly, speak respectfully, and speak out of a heart of God-breathed (agape) love."

Principal No. 2 (verses 3-16): "Extend care to people who have real needs. But, make certain you wisely assess each individual situation to consider the genuineness of the need and the best way in which to respond to that need."

We like to think of ourselves as people who readily care for others. But, I wonder? Do we spend more time talking about meeting the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ than we actually spend meeting those needs?

In order to follow the nature of the instructions that Paul gives to Timothy, we must continually assess whether or not we are truly identifying the needs in our fellow believers and meeting those needs in an appropriate way. And, when I say "fellow believers" I don't just mean our fellow believers here in Erie. I mean we need to identify and meet the needs of all believers. Those who live where we live, as well as those in our county, state, nation, and even around the world.

Oh, yeah. There is a lot of need. "How can we possibly meet all those needs?" you may ask. I'll tell you how: one need at a time. That's how. One need at a time.

Principle No. 3 (verses 17-20): "Give proper respect to leaders in the church. In fact, give double honor to those who lead well. But, don't tolerate any sin among them. Rather, publicly rebuke them for their sin in order to serve as an example to others."

Okay, then. We need to give "proper respect" to those who serve well in leadership among us. But, we also need to adopt a "zero tolerance policy" in regard to their sins.

"What? Are you kidding?" you respond. "Hold leaders accountable? Do you think I'm a nut case?"

Nut case or not, what do you suppose would happen if the people in, well, some church actually followed Paul's instructions? Between the list of requirements for leaders that Paul offers in 1 Timothy chapter 3 and in Titus chapter 1, and this concept of giving double honor to those who serve well, but holding them to a rigorous standard of righteousness, do you think the folks in that church might end up with some amazing people leading their congregation? Yeah. They would.

Principle No. 4 (verse 21): "Employ these foregoing three Principles without partiality. In fact, lead without partiality. Said another way, as you lead, treat everyone the same."

Now you may think that would be a very easy instruction to follow. But, please, think about this more closely for a minute. Examine your own heart. In your daily life and relationships, do you treat everyone the same? Do you really?

Most people tend to categorize the other people in their lives. As a result, they modify their behavior toward a particular person, either inwardly or outwardly, to match the category into which they have placed that person.

The categories can result from a variety of observed variables. Some categorize people by their nationality, or by the color of their skin, or by the way they look, or by the way they dress, eat, or speak, or by their level of education, or by the kind of work they do, or by the neighborhood in which they live, or by their relative poverty, or by their relative wealth, or by how agreeable they are, or by how disagreeable they are, or by their arrogance, or by their pomposity, or by their humility, or by their generosity, or by their greed, or by a host of other personal characteristics.

In my own life, to my shame, I confess to you that I have a very, very hard time treating everyone the same. In fact, I'm embarrassed to admit that I generally place people into one of three categories: those I

love, those I feel neutral about, and those I don't like very much. I find it easier to interact consistently well with those I love. The main criterion for categorization in my life is "trust." Can I truly "trust" this person? Can I trust him or her to accept me as I am? Can I trust him or her to consistently support me when he or she talks about me to others? Can I trust him or her with my own unique brand of loyalty?

All those other reasons for putting someone into a category don't mean much to me. But, "trust"—well "trust" means a lot to me. In fact, it means far more than it should.

But, so much for me and my sin. What's your hang up? What keeps you from living a life of impartiality? You may not even be able to conceive that you function with partiality in your life. Let me assure you that you do. In fact, if you are having trouble figuring out where you draw a line of partiality in your life, just invite the Holy Spirit to reveal the partiality that plagues your life. He will gladly help you work through a process of self-discovery.

Our partiality, our living our lives in a way that treats different people differently, resides in us as a direct result of our sin nature. Only through life-transforming power from the Holy Spirit can we hope to enfold the truth that Paul shares with Timothy when he writes:

²¹ I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism.

In the last few verses of this chapter, Paul gives some random closing thoughts. Verse 22:

²² Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.

Before ordaining a pastor, an elder, or a deacon, take the time to examine them to make certain they meet the qualifications that Paul has listed previously. Always bring someone into leadership very, very carefully.

And, do not allow yourself to share in the sins of others. If you observe someone around you sinning, don't allow yourself to be drawn into that sin. Walk away. Or, said another way, "Keep yourself pure." It takes a volitional act of your will to respond to the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit warns you to turn from the sins of others, so you won't be drawn in, by all means turn and walk away.

And, then we come to Verse 23:

²³ Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.

This is a particularly tough verse for me. I was raised in deep evangelical fundamentalism. Drinking alcohol in any form was absolutely forbidden. My godly grandmother served for over 30 years as a leader of the WCTU. That's the Women's Christian Temperance Union, for those of you too young to have ever heard of that organization. I grew up hearing story after story of lives ruined by drinking alcoholic beverages.

So, while I must strive to deal with a host of other types of sins in my own life, it seems a great deal more fair if I leave the appropriate exposition of verse 23 to some lifelong Presbyterian. (chuckle) It seems to me that many of you Presbyterians just love Paul's advice in verse 23.

Finally, notice how Paul ends this part of his letter to Timothy in verses 24 and 25:

²⁴ The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them.

²⁵ In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not cannot be hidden.

Good deeds or sins, neither can remain hidden. Might I be so bold as to suggest that we strive to focus on those godly deeds that the Holy Spirit prompts us to perform in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. "Yeah," you may respond. "But, how? How do we do that?"

Let me offer a couple of suggestions.

First of all, when you spend time with God in prayer later today, invite the Holy Spirit to empower you to put into practice the four Principles that Paul has shared with Timothy: 1) always speak respectfully to your fellow believers with God-breathed love; 2) care for those who have real needs in the best possible way; 3) treat leaders with respect, but hold them accountable; and 4) do all things without partiality, do them equally to all believers.

Then, ask God to bring circumstances into your life that will help you develop the use of these four Principles. Ask Him to help you apply them to your relationships with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

I don't know which Principle will be the hardest one for you to en flesh. But, again, when you pray, ask the Holy Spirit to empower you to make these four Principles come alive in your heart and mind. And, ask Him to bring you opportunities to put these four Principles into practice, as you relate to your fellow believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Okay. It's a little scary to ask God to take charge of your life in such a way. But, after all, you already belong to Him, don't you? Why not surrender your will to Him in this way?

When you've earnestly prayed and made these requests known to God, let me suggest that you keep your eyes open. And, wait expectantly to see how God will answer your prayers and fill your relationships with your fellow Christians with an overwhelming measure of His marvelous grace.

With all my heart, I believe if we would start following these four Principles, the people who populate our lives would begin to observe Christ's Presence within us in a new and fresh and very attractive way.

And, isn't that what living for Christ is all about?

"Thoughtfully and prayerfully building respectful, caring relationships with fellow believers, helps expose the world to the power of Christ within His children."