

## 1 Timothy 1:1-20 (John 14:18-27) + Pure Love

Monday Evening + June 10, 2019

In the name of Jesus.

"The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith," says St. Paul (1 Timothy 1:5). Luther says that this one verse sums up the entire Christian life, and I would add that it gives you the template for pastoral ministry.

It's certainly what we pastors would like to see within our congregations, yes? Love, a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith. St. Paul starts at the end and works back to the beginning, so we will too.

To love, then. It's faith in action. This is agapé love too: it's selfless love that treats your most vicious enemy the same as your best friend, because it's not expecting anything in return. Anything less is not agapé love, says Luther: he calls it fake love, because all other love is looking to earn something. All other love draws its power from the thing it loves: think of a man who loves a woman *because* she makes him happy: his love finds its power in her. On the other hand, this Christian love, this pure love, simply gives itself without limitation. It doesn't run out.

If you're going to have pure love, you need a pure heart, because only a pure heart doesn't depend on a return. This is God's work. He calls us to repentance, forgives our sins and cleanses our hearts; and He does all of this by His Word. It's no wonder then, that as St. Paul begins this first of his pastoral letters, the rest of this chapter about forming the Christian life is devoted to the proper distinction of Law and Gospel.

Along with a pure heart, what else does the Lord deliver through the Gospel? A good conscience – a conscience that is delivered from fear, delivered to peace with God, because you have God's Word of absolution that He no longer holds your sins against you. And in thanksgiving for the gift of a good conscience and peace with God, part of the pure love is making things right with those that you've hurt – which leads to a good conscience in relation to your neighbor.

And what else does the Lord give with a pure heart and a good conscience? A sincere faith, a faith that clings to Jesus, crucified for your sins and raised for your justification. Without faith, you have no assurance that your heart is pure or your conscience good, because you have no certainty that God forgives you. But for the sake of Jesus, He does: of this you can be sure.

So there you go: it's a summary of the Christian life and a template for pastoral ministry. You, pastors, are to proclaim God's Law and God's Gospel because it is His Word that gives faith, cleanses hearts and delivers the conscience; and the one who has faith, a pure heart and a good conscience is the one who is set free to love.

It's that simple. What could possibly make it difficult?

Well, says Paul, how about different doctrines, myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculation about God rather than certainty in His Word? Or vain discussions, unlawful uses of the law, lawless transgressions, blasphemy, persecution, and insolence? How about those who misuse God's Word without a doubt that they're right and you're wrong?

We could go deep into the night discussing all the different satanic attacks which seek to obscure this simple plan for Christian living and pastoral ministry. The evil one goes after every parishioner differently; and while his attacks are endless, there's only one of you. No wonder Paul tells Timothy that you are engaged in "good *warfare*." Even as you go about your duties

faithfully, you're one phone call, email or knock on the door away from a brand new crisis to pull you in another direction. I've finished many a day and summed it up by saying, "I got a lot of things done today. I just wish they were the things on *my* list."

There's always something new coming over the hill, and that's why the pastoral ministry is demanding. And exhausting. And fulfilling. You and I are honored to be in the office through which the Lord's Word is publicly proclaimed and His Sacraments administered; and each time you deliver Christ in His means of grace to repentant sinners, you are delivering a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith.

It can be a grind, though. You're not Jesus: you're neither omnipotent nor holy in yourself. You can get distracted by those vain discussions, attracted to the myths. You can fall prey to using the law unlawfully, because it can produce results. They may not be results stemming from pure love, but who can tell the difference on the outside?

And even if your doctrine is in good order and your Law/Gospel distinction exquisite, you can still get ground down: where the devil doesn't attack your faith, he will attack your love.

Here is, I think, a subtle and effective temptation of the evil one upon pastors. Or maybe it just works so well on me that I'm projecting my problems on you: it's the temptation to believe that your love for others comes from you.

Remember what Luther said about love. Most love draws its power from what it loves, like a man's love for a woman. That's a fake love, because his love depends on her; and if she spurns him, his love for her disappears. He can't sustain it with the love he has inside of him if it is not returned. As a pastor, you're *supposed* to love other people, and that takes work. You can sustain that love longer when that love is being returned by pleasant parishioners. But parishioners aren't always pleasant. Sometimes, they're perpetually annoying, troublesome or downright nasty. Sometimes, they're too depressed or too ill to return any sort of love. Sometimes, they die: and while you rejoice that they now stand in the glory of God, you're still stuck here with the grief and one less parishioner to support you.

All of this can leave you physically and emotionally spent. It can also do a number on your state of mind. But the spiritual side is this: along the way, you've fallen for the trap that your pastoral love for others comes from you, and you only have so much to give before you're done.

Ah, but the love you have to give is not yours. It is Christ's, and it is endless.

So before we ever get around to verse 5 as the template for your pastoral ministry, I proclaim it to you as the sum of your life. Repent. Repent of all those times you rely on your love as a pastor. If the pure heart, the good conscience and the sincere faith don't originate in you, then why would the love? Repent of that, and then of this: if you've been relying on your love derived from you, then you haven't been looking to the Lord and His Word for it. Therefore examine yourself. Examine yourself for vain discussions, and for unlawful uses of the law. Examine yourself for favored sins from Paul's long list, be it a love for the profane or thoughts of sexual immorality or whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine. Examine yourself and repent of these things, for they reject the grace of God. And if you do not have His forgiveness, it's not just that you don't have true love. You also don't have a pure heart, a good conscience or a sincere faith. That's the course to shipwreck.

Repent, for the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. It is He who has died in your place, who has redeemed you from sin and death. It is He

who is your strength and salvation, and His love for you knows no bounds. This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, which means He came into the world to save you. And in you, with His gifts of grace and life, He delights to display His perfect patience and mercy. He delights to give you a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith.

Oh, before you get around to the care of others, know this and rejoice. The Lord has redeemed you. His grace is sufficient for you, and His power is made perfect in weakness. You love, because He has first loved you and will not forsake you. He is your strength, your joy and your love. Be at peace.

In the name of Jesus. Amen

## 1 Timothy 2:1-14 (John 17:20-26) + One Mediator

Tuesday Morning + June 11, 2019

In the name of Jesus.

I'm assuming that as St. Paul writes by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he writes to address relevant topics. From the sounds of chapter 2, Timothy must have quite the congregation.

On the one hand, the men gather for worship and prayer with anger and quarreling. Not just quarreling, actually: in the Greek, they're gathering with anger and *dialogismou* – they come before God with different and contradictory opinions about what worship is supposed to be. On the other hand, the women are immodest and showy; not only that, but they want to be the preachers and teachers, rather than come to receive the gifts of God. Since everybody's disagreeing with each other and trying to be who they're not, it's no great surprise that there will be divisions and partisan views: as in, "Let's pray for people we like, not people we don't ... and how could you ever pray for that Nero, anyway?"

Now, the Lord gives a certain form to His Church. The pastor stands in the stead and by the command of Christ, and the congregation gathers to hear God's Word and confess the faith together. This form reflects Christ and His bride, the second Adam and His Eve forgiven for her transgressions. When a congregation is quarreling and people are seizing offices that aren't given, the reflection is different: it makes Christ look confused and self-contradictory; and it makes His bride look far from repentant and grateful – more like quarrelsome, not wedding-ready.

Truth be told, it sounds too much like my first call. It was a remote congregation formed in the aftermath of the 1960's; and given the realities of the population, it was understood (wink-wink!) that you were qualified for membership if you considered yourself to be a Lutheran of some stripe, or at least didn't mind being called a Lutheran.

By the time I arrived a few decades later, it was clear that they were not big on 2 Timothy 2. The women's group openly resented our doctrine of ordination, and thus saw it as their mission to take over as many pastoral duties as possible. As a whole, the leadership was about anger and quarreling: quarreling about how best to make the church grow, because everybody had different ideas of what a church and pastor should be doing, and then they spent their time getting angry at each other for disagreeing. This little congregation had an extraordinary variety of factions, from outright universalists and higher critics to *capital-E* Evangelical Protestants who just knew that the latest fad in pop-Christianity would turn things around. There were *even* a couple of households that wanted to come and receive the Lord's body and blood for the forgiveness of their sins, but true Lutherans were seriously outnumbered.

There I was called, and there I was ordained, and I went naively as a lamb to the altar and pulpit. Quite early on, it was apparent that the congregation didn't want me to be a pastor. They wanted me to be a mediator, working to make everybody happy and united in a vision so that the church could grow and prosper. The problem was that I was trained to be a pastor, per the requirements of my call document; though later on when I asked a leader about that very piece of paper, he responded, "Sure, we signed your call document, but we didn't really mean it."

I didn't prove to be much of a mediator among men at my first call. I did, however, manage to unite the various parties in a single purpose: when the public letter was sent out calling for my ouster, pretty much all factions were represented.

I'll spare you the gory details of my 4+ years at that parish, except for one exchange. During one of the lower points of my tenure, a rather vicious member stopped by my study for a bit of tormenting, which he started out by asking, "How does it feel now that I have crucified you?" A few hours later, talking with a trusted, experienced pastor about my troubles, I lamented, "I'm so tired of being the victim."

To which my colleague kindly, but firmly, responded, "You're not the Victim. The Victim died on the cross two thousand years ago. To call yourself the Victim is blasphemy."

Then he laughed. So did I, for joy in the moment of Gospel and perspective. The member who had "crucified" me around town rather effectively wasn't really opposed to me. He was terrified of death and opposed to Jesus, a horrible position to be in. The problem for him was that Jesus was beyond attack, ruling over all things in heaven, so I'd have to do. But for His coronation, Jesus had worn a crown of thorns on a cross, dying to bring us into His kingdom. He'd given Himself as a ransom for all, including the folks in that little congregation.

I tell this story not for pity. The wounds have healed, and the mental and emotional scars rarely trigger any more. Overall, I give thanks to God for His mercy: I consider my first call to be a blessed crucible in which the Lord mercifully took an immature pastor and kindly knocked away one idol at a time until there was nothing left to trust but Christ and Him crucified. For that kindness, thanks be to God. I do tell this story because it's not unheard-of for pastors to arrive at Doxology with a few injuries from being trampled by stampeding sheep. Whether that is the case for you, or whether you're just here to sharpen up some pastoral skills, I would point out two important things from Paul to Timothy that we pastors should always keep in mind.

First, you're not the victim. You stand in the stead and by the command of the Victim who gave Himself as a ransom for all. It's no good for you to be the victim, because you can't atone for anyone's sins or raise yourself from the dead. Those who want to attack Jesus can't get to Him, so they'll go after His people instead; and as a pastor, you'll take more fire than most. You'll be victimized, but beware lest your sufferings become an idol that you fear or love more than Christ, who suffered God's judgment for your salvation – and the salvation of all.

Second, you're not the mediator. Sure, you'll spend more time than you want mediating between unhappy people, but there is One mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all – and who gave Himself as a ransom for all because there is one God who desires all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. You stand in the stead and by the command of the one Mediator. It's by His grace that sins are forgiven, sins like anger and quarreling, sins like immodesty and a lack of self-control. He cleanses hearts and gathers God's people into His kingdom. Along the way, repentance and forgiveness unite people: it unites them in the one true faith, the one true God, the one Mediator, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and more. As that repentance takes place, that's where unity, where oneness, is found in a congregation. As the Holy Spirit works within the bride of Christ, He sanctifies her so that the people of God might continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. And it's within those gifts that people see the offices that they *are* given as opportunities to point to Christ; even to the point where, as mothers bear children, they rejoice that it points to the Church bringing forth new children of God in baptism.

Dear brothers, do not forsake the Word, for yourself or for your hearers. No matter the audience, it is the voice of the one Mediator who has given His life as a ransom for all, that all might be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. It is the voice of the one who became the Victim, that you might be a holy child who dwells in the Father's house forever.

In the name of Jesus. Amen

## 1 Timothy 3:1-16 (Luke 11:23-28) + Households

Tuesday Afternoon + June 11, 2019

In the name of Jesus.

The saying is trustworthy, so yours is a noble task; which means that Paul has got quite the list of law for you deacon/overseer-types, including the instructions that you must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, a seasoned believer, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to much wine, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money, dignified, not double-tongued, nor greedy for dishonest gain.

He's got pastors and their faults pegged pretty well, yes? Sure, Paul might be giving Timothy a list of criteria for *future* pastors, but the law always accuses and it doesn't mean you get to slack off once you've got a pulpit to stand in. So as you go from day to day as pastor, this is how you're supposed to be; and the list can especially accuse you if you tend toward perfectionism and you're haunted by words like "enough" and "mostly." As in, "When I examine myself, I'm *mostly* self-controlled; and I think I'm usually able to teach well *enough*."

It really is quite a list. You'll do a fine job of breaking all of this law at least in your thoughts; but Paul's greater point is that you stand in the stead and by the command of Christ. You're His public voice and hands to people He's died to save. If these sins become so that they're what people notice when they encounter you, then it's way past time for mere repentance. It's time for some serious intervention. In some cases, it might be time to step back or step aside, lest you give the idea that your sins are an accurate reflection of your Lord.

So I leave you to this list for self-examination, and perhaps some time with your father confessor. There are, however, a couple of things that I'd like to give special attention.

The first is this: "He must manage his own household well." You're in an interesting position: you're effectively the head of two different households – your own and a congregation. Both were instituted by God before the fall, and both enjoy His blessing to this day.

Both also place extraordinary demands upon you. You're called to love your wife as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, not to mention train up your children without exasperating them. You're also called to love the Church in the place of Christ by speaking His Word to her, delivering His gifts, visiting the sick and wayward, teaching all ages and even burying the dead.

Predictably, the devil hates both institutions and attacks both of them ceaselessly, which has consequences for you. For one, these two blessed households compete for your time. The demands of church take away time from family, and the demands of family take away time from church. This is never more true than at holidays, which invariably leaves me with resentment to confess. Throughout the year, neither group is prone to making requests of your time at convenient moments, so you'll encounter tension from one when it thinks the other is getting more love.

We also note that the Church fights like families when under attack. With armies, generals stay back and send lower ranks to fight. But with churches and families, everybody gets behind dad and lets him take the brunt of the assault. That'd be you, pastor; and in situations, God forbid, where your family and congregation are at odds, you can *really* take a beating.

For yet another, no matter how good you might be, there's only so much of finite, mortal, sinful you to go around. So even if you meet all of Paul's criteria when you're taken out of

the box as a shiny new pastor at your ordination, the devil is going to keep goading you towards abandoning those traits of above reproach, husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled and all the rest – first privately in your thoughts, and then more if he can manage.

It's tough being dad to both families, but Paul cuts no slack: "If someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" If you're too permissive with your own kids, you're going to be soft on sin as a pastor too, and you'll leave many feeling secure in their sin. If you're a legalist who demands that your kids set a perfect example for the congregation, your legalism will make itself evident in the parish at the expense of the Gospel. The answer, then, is to practice a proper distinction of law and gospel with both families, to apply the law, to call to repentance, to pronounce absolution, and to love. It also means, since you're *not* Jesus, that you end up confessing your sins and asking forgiveness from your parishioners and your kids ... and there are few moments more humbling than asking your 3-year-old for absolution.

It's in this doctrine and practice, though, that the families learn to forgive your failings, bear your burdens and look past your weaknesses. The families will always pull against each other with you in the middle, but the Lord's grace is sufficient.

I've hit you with a lot of law in this sermon, so we must get to the other thing that Paul emphasizes: he speaks of the mystery of the faith, or the mystery of godliness. The mystery is Jesus, and Paul spells out the mystery this way: "He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory." For a long time, I thought this a strange conclusion to this chapter of requirements for preachers, as if Paul wanted to put it in somewhere, and chapter 3 was as good as any. It's yet another case where I have underestimated the Holy Spirit, for this mystery of the faith is what Christ has done for you and the households you serve.

He was manifested in the flesh, because the households you serve are made of flesh-and-blood people who sin and suffer sin's wages. He became flesh to bear their sins and infirmities to the cross. Then He rose from the dead, vindicated by the Holy Spirit and proven to have conquered sin, death and devil. He did this for the households you serve, and the Holy Spirit is still at work to work faith in Jesus among those who hear His Word. He was seen by angels, for He has ascended into heaven to rule over all things for His people, including the saints in your care who can drive you crazy. He was proclaimed among the nations, and behold: He has made you a mouth to do the proclaiming, so that He is believed on in the world by the Word you preach. And as He has been taken up in glory, He will raise up His people too.

Now hear this: He was manifested in the flesh for the sake of you and your weary, sinful flesh. He bore your sins, infirmities and inadequacies to the cross, then rose again on the third day; so while they might still harass you in this life, they no longer own you. He has shared His vindication with you, for the Spirit has joined you to your Savior in your baptism. Along with vestments, you wear the righteousness of Christ; and as His Word is proclaimed out of your mouth, it is still going into your ears, that you might believe and look for the resurrection.

The mystery of godliness then includes this: you're godly for the sake of Christ, and His strength and grace are sufficient for the demanding tasks you face. As we say to baptismal sponsors, the Lord enable you to will and to do this faithful and loving work, and with His grace accomplish what you are unable to do; for He has already accomplished your salvation.

In the name of Jesus.

## **1 Timothy 5:1-25 (Luke 2:36-40) + Ministry Outside of the Flowchart**

Wednesday Morning + June 12, 2019

In the name of Jesus.

Over time, I've developed a few operational rules to keep me on track as pastor. Rule #1 for me is, "Never skip a meeting where elections are being held." I broke that rule once, missed a circuit forum, and served a term as circuit visitor. Rule #2 is, "Never say, 'I'll do it until you find somebody else.'" I broke this rule too, and so served as "temporary" choir director at Good Shepherd for 20 years, because I broke rule #2 ... and everybody else apparently knows rule #2.

Rule #3 is gratefully taken from Eugene Peterson, who said that pastors specifically need to remember that "No" is a complete sentence," lest you get pulled in a million different directions. I really need to remember rule #3.

Rule #4 is, "Never argue with a crazy person." I'll pray with them, I'll bless them, I'll speak God's Word to them and sometimes provide assistance. But I won't argue with them. It does no good. I broke that rule too, unknowingly, a couple years back, so we spent the summer coordinating with police, checking corners and initiating new security protocols around church.

Finally, rule #5: parish ministry is exponentially harder when it involves a congregation. As soon as you've got people, you've got problems.

I present to you 1 Timothy 5, where Paul gets down to the nuts and bolts of parish ministry.

The congregation is, for instance, the family of God, and families can include all ages and situations. So as you go about speaking God's Word to God's family, you need to take that into account. You're going to speak differently to an older man than a younger one, just as you'd confront your own father or mother differently than a little brother or sister.

You're going to keep the roles and callings of families distinct: it's quite clear that God normally provides daily bread through one's natural family, while He provides His means of grace through the Church. The roles overlap: family devotions at home are a blessed practice, and it is good for the Church to make charity part of congregational life. But if a natural family takes over the role of dispensing the sacraments, then it has become schismatic; and if a congregation is only about providing food and clothing to the poor, it is no longer the Church. So in the discussion of widows, Paul gives some excellent counsel on a congregation's approach to helping those in need: the obligation to help those in need of food and clothing lies first with their families, and "anyone who does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household...has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." Where those in need have no natural family to provide, the Church family steps in.

But beyond that lesson is this question regarding this discussion of widows: what sort of hornet's nest has been kicked that Paul devotes fourteen verses of this chapter simply on the treatment of widows? Luther writes that Paul has had his fingers burned on the matter, so by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he now writes to save Timothy the same pain; another option is that young Timothy has encountered this in the parish and sent out a plea for help.

In fact, if you turn those verses into a flow chart, you end up with a fourteen-step process for admitting widows to the congregational aid registry. I know. I drew it out. See, my father was a computer programmer, my sister is a math professor and I married a calculus teacher. I *like* flow charts. Neat and tidy flow charts.

But sinners are not neat and tidy, and people do not fit into flow charts: thus the aforementioned rule #5. Even if Timothy tries to treat this as a flow chart, it's only a matter of time until he ends up with someone who doesn't fit the boxes, like the 45-year-old widow who's a gossip in a friendly-not-malicious way and pretty hospitable, spends quite a bit of time in prayer but draws the line at washing feet, is probably going to stay single and chaste but wouldn't mind getting married again if the right guy came along.

This is what makes pastoral care an art, and not a science; and along with that comes one of your greatest foes: uncertainty. You and me, we're trained to delight in certainty: in theology, it's law and gospel, right and wrong, righteous and unrighteous. In Christ, it is all or nothing – as Luther says, God is above and beyond all mathematics. In your preaching, you're always trying to protect the penitent from the monster of uncertainty. You like certainty. In pastoral practice, however, things get murky quickly. It's not that God is to blame for a murky revelation. The problem is that you're dealing with sinners.

You're dealing with yourself too, another sinner naturally attracted to murk, and so Paul lays down some law for Pastor Timothy. "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels, I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging," he says, because you're going to have a gut-level response when some folks walk through the door before you ever know why they've come. "Do nothing from partiality," he continues, because it's going to be a whole lot easier to rebuke the obnoxious sinner than your good friend's son who just moved in with his girlfriend. "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands," which can give you all sorts of fits when the new pastor in the circuit is not quite where you'd like him to be theologically. "Keep yourself pure," he says again: he already warned that you're to deal with the women of the congregation in all purity at the start of the chapter, because that's going to be a temptation too.

There's a window into parish ministry: an unreliable sinner wearing a stole, caring for unreliable sinners – ripe conditions for uncertainty. And lest you want to rely on results as your comfort, Paul ends this chapter noting that "the sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden." On this side of heaven, even the visible results are unreliable.

So what's left to rely on? It's as if all you have to rely on for certain is ... Jesus.

There is one bride who is never widowed. Oh, her bridegroom died once, but only so that He might rise again and sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word, so that He might present her to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. She's considered to be widowed or abandoned by many, but that's only because she's still waiting for the great marriage feast; and in the meantime, she sets her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. Cleansed and holy, she brings up children, shows hospitality, washes the feet of the saints, cares for the afflicted and devotes herself to every good work.

That's the bride of Christ, composed of all those murky sinners who repent of their sins and are cleansed for the sake of Jesus. It's you too; for the Lord has gone to the cross and died for all sins without prejudice or partiality, not acting in haste but from before the foundation of the world. He who is pure has purified you in baptismal waters and continues to clothe you in His holiness by His Word and His Supper.

No wonder Paul counsels Timothy back to the Word in this chapter, telling him to rebuke, encourage, command and teach. That is how Christ visits His bride until He returns in glory, and

He speaks with certainty. Not "I forgive you *some* of your sins," but "all of your sins." Not, "This *might be* My body and blood," but "this *is*, and for the forgiveness of sins." Not "you *might have* received the adoption of sons at the font," but "the kingdom of heaven is yours forever."

As long as you've got a congregation, pastoral ministry will be chock-full of uncertainty a lot of the time, enough to drive you mad. Take heart in this, my brothers: while it is required of you properly to divide the Word of truth in all situations, you are not saved by your work of doing so. You do not earn heaven by making all the right decisions. Delight to repent of your sins, all bad distinctions included, and rejoice in His grace. You are numbered among those who make up Christ's bride, pure and holy forever; just like every other believer, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of Jesus. Amen

## 1 Timothy 6:1-21 (Matthew 24:44-51) + Servants and Masters

Wednesday Afternoon + June 12, 2019

In the name of Jesus.

"Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled."

Master and servants, servants and masters. It's a relationship where the two kingdoms can collide. In the kingdom of the left, the master commands and the servant obeys, because those are their offices given by God. In the kingdom of the right, they are brothers, equally redeemed by the blood of Christ. If the servant expects to be treated as an equal in the left-hand kingdom, or the master presumes to have greater status in the right-hand kingdom, then their disordered doctrine is going to cause all kinds of problems.

What are you? One of the irritations that comes with the Office of the Holy Ministry is that so many get the office wrong. On the one hand, there are those who consider the pastor to be a servant in the sense of a hireling. This shows up in special services like weddings and funerals, where families will sometimes approach the pastor with the idea that he's an event coordinator who is supposed to follow their plans, whatever those might be. It shows up too in many a parish where it's expected that the pastor shovel the snow, make sure the bathroom lights are off, fix the copier and maintain the food pantry, because "we pay him and that's his job."

Those who consider it the pastor's job to shovel snow, check the bathroom lights and fix the copier haven't read a call document recently, and they're in need of repentance for their bad doctrine of the ministry. However, if you consider such tasks to be beneath you because you're a pastor, you're in need of repentance too. I remember James Nestingen warning that the pastor who doesn't care about the bathroom lights is becoming a Gnostic, because he doesn't care about the physical aspects of the congregation. He might have something there.

On the other hand, there is a significant push these days for pastors not to be servants, but to be leaders. This leadership is often defined in a business sense: the pastor is to assess the congregation when he arrives, and then lead it to a new identity by rebranding the church, expanding the ministries of all the members, and demonstrating his leadership prowess by increased membership and giving. "We need more leaders and fewer *Herr Pastors*," I've heard it said, and there's nothing like a German term to create the image of an unlovable authoritarian straw-man in a plastic collar. Actually, this is somewhat amusing to me: if you translate "leader" into German, then you end up with the statement that we need fewer *Herr Pastors* in the church, and we need more ... *Führers*.

So what are you – a servant or a master?

Answer: You're a pastor. You stand in the stead and by the command of Christ.

You stand in the stead and by the command of Christ the Servant – the suffering Servant, don't forget, who for us and for our salvation was stricken and reviled by man, then smitten by God for our transgressions. Christ, the Servant who sought out the weak and the sick and all sorts of sinners, and delivered them, and who made clear that He had come foremost to proclaim His saving Word on the way to the cross. Christ, the Servant who although reviled and opposed and misunderstood, for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame. For you.

You stand in the stead and by the command of Christ the Master – the Master who gathers people from the highways and hedges, clothes them in rich garments and invites them to His feast. Christ, the Master who gives out all sorts of gifts to His people, that they might serve in His household and vineyard, according to their callings, until the Last Day. Christ, the Master who doesn't reward His servants for a big return of minas or talents, but for trusting that He is merciful and not a hard man. Christ, the Master who has ascended into heaven, but who visits His people in His Word and Sacraments until that day when He returns in glory.

Christ, the Master who says of you, "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes."

You're a pastor in the stead and by the command of *Christ*, because people don't need *you*. They need Him, present in His means of grace. No wonder Paul spends so much time exhorting Timothy to pay attention to "the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness." If you don't get Jesus right, you won't get the ministry right: then you end up with puffed-up conceit, useless knowledge, a craving for controversy and quarrels. If your goal is some sort of earthly gain, says Paul, your end is ruin and destruction.

You, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith. And what has the Lord given you for the battle? The sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, so that you might deliver Christ to the people.

You stand in the stead and by the command of Christ, who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see – and yet who humbled Himself and became flesh so that He might make the good confession before, of all people, the well-known weasel Pontius Pilate.

If the world didn't get Jesus, it's certainly not going to get you. If the devil opposed Jesus, he's certainly going to work to make you miserable. And where Jesus was without sin, your own sinful flesh is going to tempt you to the arrogance of being a master, the resentment of being a servant, or the despair of being insufficient for the task.

Repent of these things. You're a pastor because you were called – by God, through a congregation. You did not run without being called: you hold the office because God called you – you! He called and set you over a congregation to give His household their food at the proper times. His Word is His Word, no matter the one who proclaims it. Of course you are insufficient for the task of being the hands and the mouth of the only Sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords; to think otherwise would be arrogantly presumptuous. But His grace is sufficient for you, and His power is made perfect in weakness.

O pastors, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Deliver Christ to those who will hear, and gladly receive Him yourself. For it is in Him alone that we both hear and say, "Grace be with you."

In the name of Jesus.

## **2 Timothy 2:14-3:17 (John 1:19-29) + Right Handling**

Thursday Morning + June 13, 2019

In the name of Jesus.

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of truth.” Rightly handle the Word of truth: the word for “handle” has the meaning of “to cut a straight path without deviation.” Reminds me of John the Baptist, a voice in the wilderness who prepares the way of the Lord and makes the path straight by the proclamation of His Word. That’s you, too: you’re announcing the kingdom of heaven, delivering the King to penitent sinners by the means of grace; and all the while, you’re escorting the Church from here towards the Last Day. The Lord doesn’t change, and neither does His Word: that’s why the task of the faithful pastor is the constant, ongoing right handling of the Word of the truth to guide people on the Way of Holiness until the Last Day.

Here’s the temptation, as anyone who has driven to the seminary from the Northwest knows: driving in a straight line is monotonous. Watch a child pretend to drive with a Frisbee as his steering wheel, and he never imagines he’s holding course on the interstate through Nebraska. He’s on the curviest mountain pass ever built, with a left or a right every second or so, full speed ahead.

Boredom and sloth are two of the devil’s most underrated weapons against a pastor. He needles you with discouragement because you seem to be getting nowhere fast: in my nearly twenty years in Boise, I’ve watched men go from college student to executive, from lieutenant to colonel, from sharing an apartment to owning a nice house. It’s impressive, and we men tend to measure our worth by how much we progress and accomplish in life, how we’ve moved up the ladder from old to new. As for me, when I started at Good Shepherd, I was spending my time preaching sermons and visiting old people. Now, after twenty years of hard work, I’ve reached the point where I’m ... preaching sermons and visiting old people. Sometimes the same people, with the same stories, just older. This could be you; and for all I know, your paycheck might be for the same amount as it was twenty years ago. Look out, because the evil one will take your daily, repetitive duties and use them to convince you that you’re stuck in a rut. This is because he doesn’t want you rightly handling the Word of truth and applying it to your parishioners accordingly.

Then there are always the days when you sit down to study a text and you can find nothing new to proclaim, or you can find nothing at all to proclaim. That’s when you’re tempted to wonder if it’s time to move on to a new message; in reality when I hit the wall like that, it means that I need some rest and, more importantly, repentance; because it invariably means that in my labors to rightly handle the Word of truth to everybody else, I’ve stopped reading and meditating upon it for my own wellbeing.

On the other hand, other folks are having all sorts of fun, right? Paul speaks of those who are into irreverent babble and increased ungodliness, and their talk spreads like gangrene because they sound new and slick and cutting-edge. He warns of youthful passions – and given the number of confirmands who forsake their vows the week after confirmation, those youthful passions are obviously a powerful force. No one will dispute these days that culture and media glorify sin and encourage people to be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness but denying its power. These temptations do spread like gangrene and they shipwreck the faith of parishioners – I can’t tell you how tired I am of getting my heart broken by some child of God who is led astray by

some sin and refuses to repent as they say, "I finally feel alive. I finally feel free." The irony is that they think they've discovered something new, as opposed to the "old, tired" message of the Word. In reality, they've fallen into some sin as old as the fall, and it's just new and exciting to them. What makes them feel alive is killing them.

The devil and the world seem to be winning right now, yes? The Church is losing influence in our culture. This then creates another danger, in the form of experts who warn that the Church has got to change its message and its practices if it's going to survive in this brave new world. They usually have the best one-liners too, like "Remember that insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result," or "If we always do what we've always done, we'll always be where we've always been."

If you're going to be insane, be crazy like St. Paul. He's the one who noted that the Gospel sounds like foolishness to those without faith, right? And what is his advice to Timothy in our text? Faithfulness. Keep teaching. Patiently endure evil and correct your opponents with gentleness. Follow Paul's example of teaching, conduct, patience and steadfastness. Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, "how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

In summary, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of truth." See, if you always do what you've always done, then always be preaching the Word and administering the sacraments. Keep doing the same thing over and over, and be confident in these results: the absolution still takes sins away. Baptism still robes sinners in righteousness and joins them to Christ's death and resurrection. The Lord still gives His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, to strengthen and preserve in the one true faith unto life everlasting. All Scripture is breathed out by God, and it is always profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

Persist in these things, that you might be complete and equipped for every good work. If you always do what the people of God have always done by His grace, you will always be where they've always been by His grace – on that straight path to eternal life, the Way of Holiness; for in this Word and these Sacraments, you behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

In the name of Jesus. Amen

## 2 Timothy 4:1-22 (Luke 10:1-20) + Departures

Itinerarium + June 13, 2019

In the name of Jesus.

The time of your departure has almost come. It's about time to say goodbye. I've never been a big fan of goodbyes myself, but pastoral ministry is full of them – and it's full of the goodbyes of 2 Timothy 4.

Demas has said goodbye to Paul, deserting him because he is in love with the present world. Crescens and Titus have said goodbye, as these beloved companions have departed according to their callings for Galatia and Dalmatia. Tychicus has said goodbye because Paul has sent him to Ephesus. Trophimus got sick and dropped out at Miletus, and Erastus remained in Corinth. Paul probably wishes that Alexander would say goodbye, but he's out there somewhere, ready to inflict more harm. All others, writes Paul, have deserted him.

That's a lot of goodbyes, and not all of them good. The names are probably different on your list, but you can probably sympathize with Paul.

So now it's left to Luke alone as a companion to Paul in his captivity. Paul calls upon Timothy to fetch Mark and come to him; and in the midst of all the goodbyes and all the things that Paul has given Timothy to do throughout these two letters, there's this marvelous down-to-earth, menial task moment: when you come, Pastor Timothy, don't forget to bring my cloak and my books.

Goodbyes and menial tasks: there are plenty of those in the pastor's life.

Paul doesn't even mention funerals in this chapter. Actually, he does: he's preparing for his own: "I am already being poured out as a drink offering," he writes, "and the time of my departure has come." No wonder he is so anxious to see Timothy, his beloved child in the faith.

Then he writes the most astounding thing, and you know it well: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."

Paul is confident that he's up for a crown of righteousness at the resurrection. It's quite a statement from the former persecutor of the Church and killer of Christians: who else on this side of the Last Day gets knocked down by the risen Christ in glory and hears the Lord of heaven and earth say, "Why are *you* persecuting *Me*?"

You know, of course, that Paul's confidence isn't in himself, but in the very same Jesus who confronted him on the road to Damascus and showed him how blind he was. Paul's confidence is not that he has fought the good fight well enough, but that Christ has already conquered sin, death and devil at Calvary; not that Paul has finished the race well, but that Christ ran His course from heaven to manger to cross to hell, out of the tomb and back to heaven; not that Paul has done a spectacular job of keeping the faith, but that he has been kept in the faith of "Christ and Him crucified" for the forgiveness of sins.

Paul is confident of a crown of righteousness because Christ has worn a crown of thorns for him.

Do not forget this, my friends: Paul is not brought to faith on the road to Damascus. You hear no gospel from Jesus there. No, Paul hears the absolution in the most ordinary of ways: as Luther notes, the Lord sends Pastor Ananias – a *very* reluctant Pastor Ananias, we might add – to speak His Word and to baptize the penitent sinner.

That's how the Lord has chosen to dispense His grace, yes?

In Luke 10, he sends out the seventy-two as lambs in the midst of wolves. He sends them to heal and to proclaim, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." The kingdom has come near because the King has come near, present in the Word that they proclaim. The seventy-two return with joy and say, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name!" It's true! So Jesus responds, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you." Then He adds the most marvelous thing for you. He says, "Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

It's no wonder, then, given the battle of life and death, that Paul writes to Timothy and says what I now say to you: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."

Preach the Word. Not because it's your job, but because it's life and salvation for all who hear and believe. As Bo Giertz puts it memorably, you're the warden flinging open prison doors. You're speaking light in darkness. When you baptize in the name of the triune God, the devil must flee. When you speak the absolution, that Word cleanses even the worst of sinners and stomps the serpent's sore head again. And as the Supper is administered according to our Lord's institution, the kingdom of heaven draws so near that the King puts His body and blood into the mouths of His people.

Preach the Word, for it is the power of salvation for all who believe. Sure, Demas will still break your heart and as he runs after the passions of this world. Alexander will leave in a huff and try to do more harm. Others will complain that your sound doctrine is going the way of the dinosaur as they scratch their itchy ears to pieces. The devil will do his best to make you think you're making no difference at all. It will still be a fight, but it is a good fight and already won. It's a rough course, but the finish in Christ is sure. Preach the Word, for that is how the Spirit works to keep His people in the faith while the fight is fought and the race remains.

Remember what you're called to do: speak. Preach. Tell the Good News. Be faithful.

But all the more, rejoice in this: your name is written in heaven. The good fight in which you struggle is not to earn your salvation; it's a fight because devil and world identify you with the Victor whom they despise. The race is long because your own sinful flesh is trying to trip you up. But your name is written in heaven: it has been since you were baptized. A crown of righteousness awaits you because Christ has worn a crown of thorns in your place. Your cell door has been flung open, as will be your grave. You're free.

Depart in peace.

In the name of Jesus.