

Gospel Deserters and Gospel Refreshers

2 Timothy 1:15-18

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on 6/12/2011

Introduction

If you were to ask any North American evangelical in the 1940's to name the best preacher they've ever heard, you would think they'd say "Billy Graham" – but you'd be wrong. They most likely would've said Charles Templeton. He was a young evangelist from Canada, who, along with Graham, became a popular preacher in the mass evangelism movement that exploded in North America in the '40s.

Now Graham was recognized as a gifted preacher from the start, but Templeton's dynamic style launched him to greater prominence. In 1946, he was listed among those 'best used of God' by the National Association of Evangelicals. Newspaper reports of his evangelistic meetings boasted of witnessing up to 150 converts a night!

But despite his popularity, all was not well with Charles Templeton. For many years, even during his height of his success, he had been wrestling with hidden doubts. The biggest ones concerned the authority of Scripture, the problem of evil and the doctrine of hell. He couldn't reconcile the apparent contradictions between the teachings of ancient scripture and the findings of modern science. And the more he witnessed evil and suffering in the world and the more he contemplated the Bible's teaching of hell, the more he doubted the existence of a loving and omnipotent Creator God.

Well those doubts came to a tipping point. In 1957, Templeton renounced his faith and publicly declared himself an agnostic. He then poured the rest of his life into writing, keeping his skepticism and contempt of the Christian faith at the forefront.

Now to some people, Charles Templeton is touted as a hero, a courageous man who was willing to put aside the emotional crutch called 'religion' and bravely live life and face death knowing nothing awaits you on the other side but non-existence. But to others, Charles Templeton is another sad example of what happens when you become so ashamed of the Gospel, of what it declares, that it leads you to desert the Gospel and abandon your friends in the faith.

In fact, he stands in a long line of Gospel deserters that stretches back to the first-century, to the ancient Roman province of Asia. We know some by name. But in the same way, a man like Billy Graham stands in the company of a long line of Gospel refreshers who have nurtured faith in Christ, following in the footsteps of faithful men like Onesiphorus.

Well in this morning's passage, there is an implicit challenge. We're pressed with this question: "In which line will you stand?" At the final Day, when you stand before the throne, in which line will you be found? *Will you stand before Jesus as a Gospel deserter or a Gospel refresher?*

Be sure that every follower of Jesus will eventually feel the stigma that comes with being a Christian. If you haven't felt it yet, just wait. Since the days of the early church (you could argue even more so in our day) many aspects of our Gospel are considered either strange, ignorant or

downright offensive. That is why Paul writes in 3:12, “*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*”

Have no doubt, the message of the cross is foolishness to the world (1 Cor. 1:18). So when your Christian faith finds itself in a head-on collision with the prevailing views of our day, the question remains, “*In which line will you stand?*” I hope to see all of you in the line of Gospel refreshers. That is my aim this morning.

Background

A while ago, Pastor William introduced a series on 2 Timothy and covered the first seven verses and Pastor Fred covered vv8-14. My text is vv15-18, but I'd like to first revisit the preceding verses to help establish the context for which to understand our passage.

If you recall, Timothy was one of Paul's closest associates and considered a son in the faith. They served and suffered together in much of Paul's journeys, but by this point, Timothy was serving as an elder of the Ephesian church, and Paul was serving a death sentence in Rome. This was his second Roman imprisonment, and unlike his first (recorded in Acts 28), the conditions of this imprisonment were much worse and the outcome much different. Instead of an eventual release, tradition tells us that Paul was beheaded under Nero.

So the all-too-real prospect of imprisonment and martyrdom for the sake of Christ overshadows the entire letter. And now we learn persecution has found its way to the province of Asia (now western Turkey) of which Ephesus was its capital. So as an elder of the church in the largest, most influential city in the region, Timothy has to realize he is going to be a lightning rod for attack.

As we read vv8-14, you may have picked up on three commands that Paul gives in light of the situation: 1) v8 - Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, 2) v13 - Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me, 3) v14 - Guard the good deposit entrusted to you. Paul is charging Timothy to not be ashamed of the Gospel though it invites slander and attack. Instead he is to teach others the same sound doctrine that he heard from Paul (to follow the pattern of sound words). By doing so, Timothy is guarding the Gospel, what Paul calls the good deposit.

Before we continue, let's define this Gospel. In Paul's own words (vv8-10), the Gospel is the good news concerning the grace of God that is given -- not to those who work for it -- but to those who have been called to a holy calling. And this grace has been manifested in a person. His name is Jesus. He is the Savior who abolished death and brought life and immortality and offers it to all who receive him by faith. It is not to those who are able to live moral lives, who practice religion, who show up on Sunday morning. No, he offers salvation to those who receive him by faith alone. That is the good deposit Timothy is to guard.

And now in vv15-18, Paul gives Timothy two examples of whom to avoid and whom to imitate. This was a common technique in the Bible for exhorting people to live a certain way. Often it will contrast two paths or two groups -- foolish vs. wise, wicked vs. righteous. You are to avoid one and imitate the other. Here we have Gospel deserters vs. Gospel refreshers.

An Example to Avoid: Gospel Deserters

Paul has two points. His first can be summarized this way: Do not become a Gospel deserter who abandons the faith and the faithful out of shame. Look again at v15, “You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes.” The word for ‘turned away’ can be translated as ‘deserted’, which is why I call them Gospel deserters.

Apparently those in Asia, who should have stood by Paul during his second imprisonment, had instead deserted him. He mentions this event again in chapter 4:16, “At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me.” Now we don't have details of what happened, but Paul does name two of the deserters, possibly because they were key leaders in the church, maybe even elders. Since they're not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture we don't know much about them.

Now Paul says their desertion was personal. He says it was “from me”. But it was also theological, meaning they not only deserted Paul but also Paul's gospel. I come to that conclusion because I'm reading v15 in light of the previous section where Timothy is charged to follow Paul's pattern of sound words and to guard the good deposit. These deserters failed to do just that. They didn't guard the Gospel, instead they walked away from it and from Paul, a preacher, apostle and teacher of the Gospel.

Now let me address a question that might be on your mind. If you were to ask me if these were true believers who lost their salvation because they left the faith, I would say “No”. I'm convinced that Scriptures teaches that salvation cannot be lost, lest the purposes of God can be thwarted. I would argue that their desertion just proves they were never saved in the first place. I would point to 1 John 2:19 where John refers to deserters of the faith and says, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” I think that verse would apply to these Gospel deserters. Their leaving makes it plain that they were never true believers in the first place.

But the harder question is: What would make someone desert the Gospel? Could it happen to anyone I know? Could it happen to me? That's the big question. I'm convinced the answer has to do with shame. What I mean is this: When someone deserts the Gospel, there are usually a number of reasons, which could include intellectual doubts. So Charles Templeton called it “intellectual suicide” to continuing believing these things. He wants you to believe that reason and hard facts alone were what led him to walk away. But scratch deeper and you'll see that something else was driving him. It's like an iceberg. What is on the surface is only a fraction of what lies beneath.

Look deeper and more often than not you'll discover fear, more specifically the fear of people's opinions and the accompanying shame. That means he didn't just intellectually doubt aspects of the Gospel. He was embarrassed by them and embarrassed to be associated with those who believe in them.

That's the particular shame that Paul is referring to in chapter one. Notice the key word that is repeated three times. "Do not be ashamed" (v8). "I am not ashamed" (v12). "He was not ashamed" (v16). Remember, Paul has already told us the message of Christ crucified is folly to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews (1 Cor 1:23). And now he, as one of the foremost defenders of this message, is awaiting execution in a Roman dungeon. So for those in Asia, it was shame in the eyes of man, it was the stigma associated with being a Christian, that led them to desert the message and the man.

When Paul was writing, I wonder if he was thinking about Jesus' words from Mark 8:38. Where he said, "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Friends, if the fear of man's shame overtakes your fear of the Lord's shame, then you are primed to desert the Gospel when pressure and persecution hits. A good illustration would be to look at the issue of homosexuality, which is a controversial topic in the news and in the church. Now the Bible clearly teaches that homosexual practice is a sin. And the Gospel clearly demands confession and repentance of all sin in our lives. So homosexuality related to the Gospel. Well there has never been, in the history of our world, greater pressure upon Christians to condone homosexual practice than in our day. But to do so would undermine the Gospel because it is condoning a particular sin that the Gospel calls us away from when we're called to Christ.

But the rhetorical battle being waged by those who advocate homosexuality is intense and rather shrewd. The message they're sending is that the complete normalization of homosexuality in American society is inevitable. And that comes with a warning: If it's inevitable, then you better be on the right side of history. That's why proponents of the gay rights movement have tried to tie their cause to the civil rights movement of the 60's. Everyone knows now that a racist is on the wrong side of history. It's argued that the Christian who still believes that homosexual practice is wrong is going to find himself or herself on the wrong side of history. That is a powerful argument. It touches upon our fear of shame. Who wants to be on the wrong side of history?

Well if we believe that morality is a social construct, that our definition of right and wrong evolves with every succeeding generation, then we had better get on board with the general consensus. Because there is no doubt that the moral landscape in America is changing. But if we believe morality is something established and given to us by a Creator God who has clearly revealed right and wrong in his Word, then the bigger concern than being on the wrong side of

history is being on the wrong side of this God when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

Let me be clear: There is no place for hate regarding this issue. No place for bigotry. But there is a place and a huge need for Christians to not be ashamed and to guard the good deposit of the Gospel, especially for the sake of homosexual persons who need the Gospel!

That is just one example. There are plenty of others. If you, as a Christian, were to pull the average person off the street and explain to him what you believe, he would be shocked, even offended, by some of the things you say. You actually believe all humanity can trace its ancestry to a couple named Adam and Eve? That is so ignorant because it flies in the face of modern science and evolutionary theory. You actually believe that everyone who ever lived shares the guilt of that first man? That everyone is born under the just condemnation of God, which if not removed will consign us to eternal punishment in a realm we call hell? You actually believe that the only way to be forgiven of that guilt is to turn to Jesus in repentance and faith? That all other religions fail to address sin thus cannot save? That Jesus is the only way?

Do you realize how this comes across to the average person on the street? It sounds irrational, judgmental and intolerant. That's why there are pastors and writers who are preaching sermons and writing books that are denying and deserting these Gospel truths. They might say it is for intellectual reasons. They might offer alternative interpretations of Scripture. But from what Paul is saying here, below the surface, what is driving them away from the truths of the Gospel is ultimately shame. They're embarrassed by what the Gospel teaches.

But instead of just pointing fingers, I must confess that there are times when I am ashamed of the Gospel -- of its exclusivity, of its emphasis on judgment and eternal punishment. If I were not ashamed of these things, I would talk about them more with my unsaved friends and family. Sadly, I don't do it enough. But when I think about Jesus' words -- "Whoever is ashamed of me and my words...of him will [I] also be ashamed." -- that sobers me. That strikes a healthy fear of the Lord in my heart. I want to fear the shame of the Lord far more than the shame of others. I want to be like Onesiphorus.

An Example to Imitate: Gospel Refreshers

And that's why Paul mentions him in vv16-18, to function as an example that we should imitate in contrast to Gospel deserters. We can sum up his second point like this: Become a Gospel refresher who keeps the faith and refreshes the faithful without shame. Look at vv16-18. "¹⁶ May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, ¹⁷ but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me—may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day!—¹⁸ and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus."

Onesiphorus means "bringer of profit (help)", so he certainly lived up to his name. Instead of leaving Paul like everyone else in Asia, he went after him. He searched Paul out. Now the

Romans would never have arrested Paul for religious reasons. It was most likely for sedition or disturbing the peace. In the eyes of Rome, he would be a 'radical extremist'. Which explains why his former friends and supporters were embarrassed of him and probably scared to be associated with him. But Onesiphorus was different. Paul says he was not ashamed of his chains.

When he came to Rome, he searched for Paul earnestly, implying that it wasn't easy to find him. This was not like Paul's first imprisonment in Rome where he was basically under house arrest. He was easily accessible and believers came to visit as they pleased. But this time around he was probably locked away in the underground dungeons of Rome. He was hard to find, but that didn't deter Onesiphorus. He found Paul.

Now notice Paul's play on words in v17. Because Onesiphorus searched earnestly and found me -- may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day. Since he found me, may he find mercy! Notice also the double occurrence of 'Lord'. Most commentators recognize the first occurrence as a reference to Christ and the second to the Father. So Paul is praying to Jesus to enable Onesiphorus to find mercy from the Father on that final Day of Judgment.

What is significant about that statement? Notice two things. First, notice that his prayer seems to parallel Jesus' beatitude in Matthew 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." Jesus had promised the merciful will find mercy. But second, notice that Onesiphorus' act of mercy towards Paul did not earn him God's favor come Judgment Day. Paul recognized that God's favor rests not on our faithfulness or our service rendered. It rests on His mercy alone, which is why Paul still prays for it. God grants mercy not because of who we are or what we do. God grants mercy because God is merciful.

Now when Paul says Onesiphorus often refreshed him, that word 'to refresh' means to encourage or cheer up. This could have involved bringing food or supplies or news regarding the various churches Paul planted. His presence and help encouraged Paul to keep the faith, to guard the good deposit in the face of his accusers. That's what a Gospel refresher brings. And remember, he is doing all this at his own risk. In those days, where there was systematic effort by the Romans to persecute Christians, to openly associate with an imprisoned believer had serious repercussions. But Onesiphorus was neither ashamed of Christ nor Paul his servant. He was a Gospel refresher who kept the faith and refreshed the faithful without shame.

I want to be like that! How does one avoid Gospel deserting and become a Gospel refresher like Onesiphorus? Paul points us to the answer in v12. Look there with me. He writes, "But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me." The reason Paul and Onesiphorus are not ashamed of the Gospel, what enables them to have the heart and courage to guard the Gospel and to refresh others in the Gospel is because they know whom they have believed. And his name is Jesus! Friends, I want you to see how the Gospel message is what empowers you to become Gospel refreshers. So we already read in Mark 8:38 where Jesus said that whoever is ashamed of me and

my words, I will be ashamed of him. But this same Jesus also said in Matthew 10:32, “everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven.”

The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth to live the life we should have lived AND die the death we should have died, so that if we receive him by faith and acknowledges him before men, He will acknowledge us before the Father. Jesus will become your Advocate who pleads before the throne of God. We sang that old hymn with the college students the other day, it starts like this: Before the throne of God above, I have a strong and perfect plea / A great High Priest whose name is Love, who ever lives and pleads for me.

If you know the Jesus whom you have believed, then you know there is no need to feel ashamed before the Holy God. The sins for which you once were so ashamed, that made you hide from God in shame -- those sins were paid for and removed from God’s sight. If you know the Jesus whom you have believed, then you know God is no longer your enemy. He is your Father and Friend. If you know the Jesus whom you have believed, then you know the promise is true for you, that nothing can possibly separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:37-39). You know that God will never leave you, never forsake you (Heb. 13:5). I know that while in heaven he stands, no tongue can bid me thence depart.

So here is the connection between the Gospel and becoming a Gospel refresher: There will be days when you more acutely feel the shame and scorn of the world, for being a Christian. You will feel the pressure to either downplay or deny the faith. When that happens, remember the Jesus whom you have believed, and find your courage and confidence in the promise that God will never shame those in Christ Jesus. God is on your side.

And if God is for us, who can be against us? If God will never shame me, why should I be concerned with the shame of man? The shame of man becomes a small thing in light of God’s complete favor and acceptance for those in Christ. And once you are freed from the grips of man’s shame, from the fear of man’s opinion, then just like Onesiphorus, you are freed to serve the Gospel and refresh its defenders without shame, without abandon. That’s how Gospel refreshers are made!

Friends, we need to be honest with ourselves. Ask yourself: Am I ashamed by certain aspects of the Gospel? Are there particular truths taught in the Bible that I am embarrassed to be associated with? Or are there any Christians that you are embarrassed to be associated with? Now of course there are Christians out there who say or do silly or hateful things that deserve shame. I’m not talking about them. I’m talking about Christians who are ridiculed and marginalized by society simply because they stand firm on the Gospel. Are you ashamed to be identified with them?

On the final Day of the Lord, there will be two lines: the company of Gospel deserters and Gospel refreshers. In which line will you stand? In which line will you be found when Christ returns in the glory of his Father with the holy angels?