

Be Mission-Minded!

(2 Timothy 1:3–10) ³ I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. ⁴ Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵ I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. ⁶ For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. ⁷ For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. ⁸ So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God. ⁹ He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, ¹⁰ but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

In Christ Jesus who has loved us with an everlasting love, dear fellow redeemed,

On September 11, 2001, as terrorists crashed planes into the Twin Towers and our nation's Pentagon, hundreds of “last” phone calls were made by the victims of those deadly attacks. You can read the transcripts of some of those calls as they were recorded by 911 operators or left as voice messages. It won't surprise you to learn that none of the callers reminded loved ones to take out the trash or that the mortgage payment was due on the 15th. No, the harsh reality of the moment provided a singular focus. Sensing death was imminent, many of the callers expressed their love for their family and their regrets that they would not be with them in the future. As I read these messages, it made me wonder what I might say in such a phone call. What would you say to those closest to you? Let's give this some thought today as we listen in to a portion of the last letter that Paul would ever pen – a letter that he sent to Timothy, his coworker in ministry and his dear son in the faith. By word and example, Paul tells Timothy and all of us: Be Mission-Minded! 1) Grateful for the past; 2) Fearless in the present; and 3) Looking forward to the future.

Like the 9/11 victims I referenced a moment ago, the Apostle Paul had the sense that he was about to die – by execution at the hands of the Roman government. And yet, even on death row, Paul was filled with gratitude for God's blessings past and present: **“I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers.” (2 Timothy 1:3).** Paul is grateful for his place in a family of believers, who from generation to generation had passed along God's promise of a Savior. In misguided zeal, Paul had persecuted that Savior and his followers until Jesus, in his grace, intervened to show Paul that he was the Messiah his family had talked about, the One who fulfilled all those prophecies his family had shared with him. Paul was so grateful for those who had made it their mission in life to speak God's Word to him.

Paul wanted Timothy to have and hold in his heart the same gratitude. He tells his friend: **“I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.” (2 Timothy 1:5).** Lois and Eunice were missionaries. They hadn't traveled the world. They were “home” missionaries, if you will, teaching their children to know Jesus from little on so that Paul could say of Timothy, **“...from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation**

through faith in Christ Jesus.” (2 Timothy 3:15). How grateful Timothy could be to have such mission-minded Christians in his life, and how thankful he could be to include among them his pastor, Paul, who not only taught him all about Jesus and his saving love, but, in turn, trained Timothy for the public ministry and was there to lay hands on Timothy at his ordination. Paul writes: **“For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.” (2 Timothy 1:6).**

Ministry, in every form it takes, is God’s gift to us. Ministry is the privilege of serving others with the news that Jesus loves them and has taken away their sin. Like Timothy and Paul before him, some are called to serve in the public ministry, proclaiming God’s Word from the pulpits and in the classrooms of our congregations and schools here at home and in faraway places. All of us, however, whether serving in public ministry or not, all of us have been given a mission by God to serve others with his saving truth through every vocation and role God has given us – grandma, grandpa, mom, dad, daughter, son, sister, brother, coworker, neighbor, and friend.

So many lives to touch with a message that, in fact, the difference between life eternal and death unending! So many opportunities to tell people we know best and care for most, that Christ alone saves! Tell me, what more reason do we need to foster in our heads and hearts a mission mindset – one that flows from the gratitude we have for those who made it their mission to tell us about Jesus. God’s powerful gospel has saved us, but there are those precious souls in our lives whom God has used to bring us to the baptismal font, to sing to us, “Jesus Loves Me This I Know,” to teach us Bible stories and the basics of Christian doctrine. We will have all eternity to thank them for the role they played in our salvation story, but we don’t have to wait for eternity. We thank them, and more importantly the Savior who sent them to us, by paying forward their kindness as we help others to know Jesus and as we encourage them in their walk with Christ.

But let’s be honest, our deep gratitude and best intentions are often met with great resistance from our own sinful heart and flesh. How often does it happen that God tees up the perfect opportunity for us to speak a simple truth about Jesus, only to see us take a pass? Why? I’m guessing your reasons aren’t that different from my own – fear and shame. It seems the same culprits were at work in Timothy’s life. Why else would Paul have told him: **“...the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. ⁸ So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.” (2 Timothy 1:7-8)?**

Paul makes it clear that my reluctance to speak of Jesus is a spirit problem – not a Holy Spirit problem, but a Joel spirit problem. I can be very brave when I’m in the company of Christians like you but turn me loose in the world and I clam up. And yet my silence speaks volumes. It says I’m ashamed of Jesus. Why? What am I afraid of? I’m scared that if I speak up, I’ll be judged as some sort of religious fanatic or worse, a bigot. Isn’t that how many people think of us Christians? And so it goes – I’m shamed into silence by a stereotype. But it isn’t just outsiders. At times I’m hesitant to speak my faith even around close friends and family, worried I will push them away if they think I’m too preachy.

I have a spirit problem. What about you? I’m asking, not because misery loves company. No, more than anything, I want us to give this matter prayerful thought. You see, when our spirit is acting contrary to the Holy Spirit’s power and prompting, we have a very serious problem. How serious? Jesus says: **“If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:38).** Now there’s something to fear – Jesus being ashamed of us when he returns as Judge. We don’t want that! So, what should we do? Our natural instinct is to deny the problem, and if that doesn’t work, we make excuses for our behavior. But that will never solve our spiritual troubles. No, there’s only one thing to do, and God has done it. In his great

mercy he has invited us to bring our sinful failures to him for his full forgiveness and spirit-renewing power. This is exactly what Paul was urging Timothy to do when he told him to “fan into flame” his gift from God.

That’s a great image. At our campsite, when the fire starts to die, I’ll use a piece of cardboard or some old newspaper to try to fan the flames back to life. Sometimes it feels like I’m going to flap my arms off before the embers catch again. God’s Holy Spirit does the same sort of thing for our spirit and the faith that gives it life. He doesn’t use cardboard or newspaper. He uses the Bible. With the Good News of God’s unconditional love and forgiveness, he breathes new life into the faith he has worked in us. Through his power-packed promises he renews our hearts and kindles in us the fire of his love for the lost and hurting all around us.

Working through Word and sacrament, it is God’s Spirit who makes us mission-minded, enabling us to be fearless in the present, so that we might be bold enough to speak his truths to family, friends and even strangers. As I say, he does this not by beating us up with guilt over past failures, but by blotting out our sins, washing us clean in the blood of Christ and making every opportunity to give witness his truth a new and first-time event. There’s no record of any wrongs, not for us who know and trust Jesus. How can we be sure? Paul tells us, **“He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.” (2 Timothy 1:9).** Our good standing in God’s holy family is not based on our past deeds, or present efforts, or even our future accomplishments. We are God’s forgiven, dearly loved people always and only because of Jesus. Our future on earth and our eternity in heaven are completely secure because of what the risen Christ has accomplished in our name. In fact, Paul assures us: **“This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,¹⁰ but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” (2 Timothy 1:9-10).**

What an amazing truth! God has known you and loved you from all eternity. In this love, he gave his Son for you, that you might be his forever, and he did this, not for you alone, but for your family, friends, and neighbors. God wants them all to be saved by coming to know the truth about Jesus and what he has done for them. You are just the person to tell them. After all, God’s Spirit breathed life into you when you were dead in sin. Now he puts his life-giving Word in your mouth and promises to use the message you share to make others alive forever.

Will we still have concerns about what people may think of us, how they might respond to us when we start talking about Jesus? I’m afraid so. We are sinner-saints who, on this side of heaven, never rid ourselves of all our fears and doubts. But God uses his powerful promises to overcome our weaknesses. The reality of our present peace with him and the anticipation of our future joy in heaven give us all the courage we need to speak in the moment. We Christians are mission-minded because we are always looking forward to the future when, as Paul says, death will be destroyed, and we will live sin-free with Jesus forever.

If I get a last phone call to my loved ones, I plan to urge them to cling to Jesus through his words and promises. I want them to know that I will be looking forward to seeing them at the Savior’s side when we’re together in the glories of heaven. But here’s the thing, we don’t have to wait for a last phone call. We can say these things right now and not just to family but to everyone, knowing that Jesus has loved them from all eternity and that his Holy Spirit is just waiting for the opportunity to plant the gospel seeds we sow, deep into the hearts of the people we know and meet, always for Jesus’ sake. Amen.