

FAITHLESS OR FAITHFUL

II Timothy 1:13-18

Paul warned Timothy against being ashamed of the gospel he was preaching or of his friend who was then a prisoner in Rome on account of his faithfulness in proclaiming that gospel. In order that he might preach the gospel to lost sinners, Paul had given up his worldly ambitions and dedicated himself fully to this one purpose of carrying this glorious message from place to place. For that reason he had been imprisoned, and it seemed that soon he would be put to death.

Timothy was urged to keep the example of Paul ever before him. He was admonished to hold carefully and tenaciously, as a pattern or outline of the Christian faith, the sound teaching which he had received from Paul. An interesting word is used here to denote the form of sound words which Timothy was urged to hold fast. This word means an outline sketch or ground-plan such as an architect might make before getting down to the detailed plans of a building. The importance of this sketch or pattern cannot be over-emphasized. Paul simply claimed his own teaching to be no more than a starting point. Timothy was not told merely to repeat what Paul taught, but to follow that teaching as a basis or pattern. Paul's teaching had been a brief summary of the truths which needed to be held and proclaimed faithfully.

As any thoughtful, wise and loving parent will exercise great care in the instruction of a child, so the Apostle Paul took great pains to teach and train Timothy, his son in the Christian faith. Knowing the importance of correct doctrinal views, Paul took advantage of every opportunity that presented itself to impart to his pupil the truths by which he lived and wrought.

There was a call for effort on Timothy's part, for he was exhorted to hold fast as a pattern of sound words what he had heard from Paul. The Apostle was saying in substance, "Timothy, do not let anything go that you have received from God; cleave to the truth; then, in that day when you have to give an account you will have the Lord's approval because of your faithfulness." This word "sound" means healthy, not diseased, free from all infection of error, health-giving, ministering to the spiritual well-being of believers.

Throughout his ministry Paul proclaimed the good news of salvation in Christ. This he did by preaching, teaching, writing and consistent Christian living. Now that he was leaving the earthly scene, there remained the possibility that others coming later might alter or deny the truth which he had taught. Hence Paul cautioned Timothy to remain true to the life-giving words from God which he had learned from the lips and the pen of the Apostle. These apostolic utterances had been given in Christian faith and love, and without a single ulterior motive. Therefore, it was the duty of Timothy to regard them as a model or pattern to be copied carefully. Since the gospel proceeded from God, neither Timothy nor any other man is at liberty to change the meaning or the words in which God gave it through His chosen writers.

Because we may be so greatly tempted to become unfaithful, we are urged to hold fast and be faithful to the truth. We are to do so in the spirit which centered in Christ, whose entire ministry was exercised in faith

and love. All who seek to follow Him will note the kindly way in which He taught and worked. He is ever the inexhaustible reservoir of every spiritual quality that His people may need. The Holy Spirit will minister unfaithfully the needed supplies to those who trust and obey.

God's revealed truth must be held in faith and love. That is, it must be accepted with the heart and expressed in the conduct and proclaimed with the lips. The spirit in which one clings to the truth and passes it along to others matters greatly. It is an easy thing to become disagreeable and contentious, even while endeavoring to be faithful to truth. The servant of God is to maintain an attitude of faithfulness to Christ and love to the brethren. As we stand firmly for the truth and walk in love with our brethren, we will be able to commend to others that truth which we seek to proclaim with our lips.

In view of the defection from the revelation of divine truth, Timothy was instructed to guard and defend the beautiful and goodly deposit which had been entrusted to him. He was responsible for seeing to it that this sacred treasure was neither to be lost nor destroyed, nor was its beauty to be marred by hostile hands. Timothy was urged to guard this excellent and precious treasure against every attack, and to do his utmost to prevent it from being changed or modified in the slightest degree.

Due to the presence of false teachers and the prevalence of their unsound doctrines, Timothy was assured that he would need divine aid to safeguard the truth. Unaided he could not achieve it, so the thought was added that this guarding could not be done successfully apart from the Holy Spirit Who dwells within believers. Without His aid any man would be attempting the impossible.

Because God's children are tempted to forsake the truth, which has been consigned to their custody, they are urged to remain faithful to it. Satan hates fidelity to God's truth. For that reason he is tireless in his attempts to seduce all who are loyal adherents to the truth. Of the weapons which he uses, ridicule is one of the most devastating. More deserters are made from the fear of ridicule than from almost any other cause. Many cannot stand being laughed at and ridiculed. Another method which Satan uses to get Christians to forsake God's truth is tell them that the reason they hesitate to do so is that they are old-fashioned. Somehow people naturally incline to shrink from that which is old-fashioned. They just loathe being, or even being considered, old-fashioned, whether in dress or beliefs. The masses want the new-fangled. Another ruse of the devil is to claim that those who hold to God's truth are in a minority. So, in order to be popular with the crowd, some turn away from the truth.

Paul had heard that many in proconsular Asia, of which Ephesus was the capital, who were formerly his friends, had believed what the false teachers had taught them and that they had repudiated his apostleship. They had not been faithful to him in the hour of his need. The heart of the Apostle was saddened by the consciousness that those upon whom he had relied proved faithless when their friendship was needed most. Among those who turned away from Paul were Phygellus and Hermogenes. By their faithlessness and defection they attained an immortality of disgrace. This account of their disgraceful cowardice was intended to influence Timothy to avoid such conduct. It is ever a shame and disgrace when friendship endures only in times of prosperity and popularity and withers before the first breath of hardship or suffering.

In order that Timothy might be strengthened in his loyalty, Paul gave him an example of a faithful Christian friend in the person of Onesiphorus. Evidently he was a citizen of Ephesus who had been won to Christ by Paul, and who had been an earnest and faithful worker in the church there. Concerning him Paul wrote Timothy, "In how many things he ministered unto me at Ephesus, thou knowest very well." His very name meant "profit bringer" or "bringer of help," and his life was true to his name. He brought profit to God, to others and to himself. It was the habit of his life to bring consolation, cheer and courage to the cheerless and the depressed.

During Paul's imprisonment in the dungeon in Rome, Onesiphorus made his way to that city, perhaps on business of some sort, but more likely for the specific purpose of visiting the great Apostle. Not knowing the place of his imprisonment, it appears that he had some difficulty in locating Paul, and may have endangered his own life in doing so. But, having resolved to see his friend, Onesiphorus searched for Paul very diligently until he found him. Although it was not an easy task, Onesiphorus succeeded in getting permission to interview Paul. When he was ushered into the dungeon, the two greeted each other warmly. At that time Paul was depressed because he had just been thinking about those who had deserted him, about the fact that winter was approaching and he did not have a cloak, and about the fact that death was staring him in the face.

Onesiphorus was not ashamed to stand by Paul in prison and say, "He and I are friends; he and I stand for the same things; we serve the same Master, the Lord Jesus Christ." He boldly identified himself with the prisoner of the Lord. As a friend his ministrations were not contingent upon favorable circumstances. On frequent occasions he brought refreshment to Paul. He was repeatedly kind to him.

We can visualize Onesiphorus and Paul as they sat down on the cold stones of that prison and talked. We do not know what they said to each other. They may have discussed their own personal experiences of saving grace. They may have discussed their past victories in the work of the Lord. They may have discussed the future of the church at Ephesus, from whose members Onesiphorus had brought tidings of their love for Paul. They may have prayed together. But whatever the nature of their conversation, it brought new courage and fresh hope to Paul. It put new light into his face. When Onesiphorus went away he left a revived and strengthened Paul. He had refreshed Paul greatly. How did he do it?

First, he went to see him. Paying him a visit was a very simple deed, one which did not require culture or genius, but it did call for courage and a loving heart. Only Paul knew how much this kindness meant to him. "A friend in need is a friend indeed." Secondly, Onesiphorus sympathized with Paul. The fact that he was there showed that he cared. Seeing that his friend was under the load with him, Paul was encouraged, cheered and refreshed greatly. A sympathetic friend in a time of adversity is an unspeakable comfort. Thirdly, Onesiphorus convinced Paul that he was appreciated. How refreshing is appreciation! How much more smoothly the machinery of the world would run if it were only oiled now and then with the beautiful lubricant of appreciation! Appreciation is something that enriches both him that gives and him that receives. Onesiphorus performed his ministry of helpfulness to Paul in time, that is, before the Apostle was beheaded. His fidelity to his Lord was reflected in and proved by his faithfulness to the Lord's servant.

We, too, should bring light to other's faces and encouragement to their hearts. Why is this true? Because it was the practice of our Saviour and Lord. That was what He did all of the days of His life here on earth. That is what He is doing today. That is what He will be doing tomorrow. Wise is any person who follows the example of Christ in this all-important task. Another reason is, it needs to be done. If a great Christian like Paul needed someone to brace him up and put the light back into his face, it is not surprising that multitudes need the same thing done for them today. A glorious thing about this task is that we can work at it in the most obscure or the most public place, in the home or away from home, in the country or in the city. There is no way of estimating the amount of good we can do for others by doing for them what Onesiphorus did for Paul. What he did, any of us can do for others.