

THE MODEL LEADER

by Ray C. Stedman

In the closing days of his ministry, the Apostle Paul left Timothy in Ephesus in order to correct some of the conditions in the church there. Paul went on into Macedonia, from where he wrote this first letter to Timothy. In his instructions, the apostle speaks not only to Timothy, but to all believers in every generation and to all churches in all ages.

The first task Paul charges Timothy with is to guard the gospel; to oppose certain teachers who were misleading people with strange and perverse ideas about the gospel. Second, Timothy is to instruct the Ephesians on the proper use of the Law in the Christian life. But the apostle knows that instructions are never enough. Models, examples, are needed, so Paul sets forth his own experiences to encourage young Timothy.

So this morning, in Verses 12-17, we are now turning from Timothy's work to Timothy's model. In Verse 11, the apostle has just referred to "the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted." Then he says, Verse 12:

I thank him who has given me strength for this, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful by appointing me to his service, though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. {1 Tim 1:12-14 RSV}

Timothy was launched upon a dangerous work. The Emperor Nero had begun persecuting Christians, who were now being pressured by the Roman authorities to choose between Caesar and Jesus as Lord. The Ephesians, among whom Timothy was left to labor, were easily inflamed. The account in the book of Acts of the riot led by the silversmiths of that city demonstrates how quickly a mob could form in Ephesus. Also, Timothy would be confronted with the Jewish teachers who hounded Paul everywhere he went. They too could inflame a riot, as they had done on many occasions. So it is understandable that Timothy would be a bit fearful about working in Ephesus.

Paul's first word of reassurance is wonderful. He tells Timothy how he himself had, from the very beginning of his ministry, been strengthened by the Lord; he was divinely strengthened. Many passages in Scripture describe how Paul had often faced danger, death, rejection, resistance, betrayal, threats and hardships. Though he had, I am sure, great natural courage, it never was enough, because he tells us in several places that when he came into a city to preach the gospel he did not do so with a great sense of triumph and courage. Rather, as he says of Corinth, he came with fear, trembling and uncertainty. He was not met by the city fathers, or by a special committee on evangelization, or by a big propaganda effort, nor was he hosted at luncheons all over town. He came into a city in the dark of the night, in the dust of the road, afraid to say anything at first.

But the Lord strengthened him. That is what Paul wants Timothy to see. Sometimes that strengthening was physical. For instance, Luke tells us that in Lystra, Timothy's own home town, the populace which at first had received Barnabas and Paul with a great welcome suddenly turned against them and stoned Paul. He was dragged out of the city, and left for dead. Yet, as the believers gathered around him and evidently prayed for him, we are told that he rose up and went back into the city. The next day he went on as if nothing had happened because God had restored him and strengthened him.

There is always this possibility of a physical impartation of strength. In the letter to the Colossians, Paul speaks of his preaching and teaching so as to present every man mature in Christ, then he adds, "for this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me," {Col 1:29 RSV}. This is a supply of actual physical strength which the Lord offers to all his people -- not just to apostles or to preachers, but to anybody who has a task requiring energy that he does not have. The Christian should not give up and say, "I can't do

it." He should say, "I can't, but He can. Therefore, I can. Let's go!" This is what the apostle had discovered in his own ministry.

Sometimes the divine supply is mental strength. In Ephesians, Paul speaks of the insight that was given to him in the mystery of Christ, (Eph 3:4 {RSV}). His eyes were opened to see truth that he would not otherwise have seen. The Apostle John speaks of this too: "Jesus Christ has come and has given us understanding," {cf, 1 Jn 5:20 RSV}.

(By the way, this is a good word for students who are facing final examinations. Now God does not promise to teach you something that you have never learned, or that you did not bother to read about. But he will help you to understand what you have read. You can handle a tough examination in a way you never would have thought if you are reckoning upon this strengthening power of Jesus Christ in your life.)

Sometimes the supply imparted is emotional strength. Paul says in Second Corinthians that God, "who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus," {2 Cor 7:6 RSV}. Here is another ministry of the living Christ, right now, in the midst of life.

This is the missing note of Christianity in our day. Christianity is not a philosophy you come to learn about on Sundays; it is a lifestyle to be exhibited from day to day, in every circumstance and situation of life, to let people see (as Paul puts it in Second Corinthians 4:7) that, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us," {2 Cor 4:7 RSV}. That is authentic Christianity. Everywhere Paul went he experienced this strengthening of the Lord, and it was always to produce effectiveness in his life. In Galatians, he says, "he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me for the Gentiles," {Gal 2:8 RSV}. In First Corinthians, he says, "I labored more abundantly than them all, yet not I [he always adds that: it is not coming from him, it is not his natural abilities] but the grace of God which was with me," {1 Cor 15:10 KJV}.

Last Sunday night we had the Vacaville prison ministry team with us, reporting on the ministry they had just concluded back in the Eastern states. I was amused at the report of one of the young men on that team, Michael Dinsmore, a relatively new Christian. He told how, when he shared his testimony of what God had done to him in prison, it had a tremendous effect on people -- they would break down and start crying as he talked. Afterwards, they would tell him, "This is the most exciting meeting we've ever been to! You must share this with the whole church." Then Michael would turn to his leader and ask, "What did I say?" This became something of a joke throughout the whole trip, as he was constantly amazed with the fact that God was doing wonderful things through his simple testimony.

This is a great encouragement to our hearts, because this strengthening is not just for preaching the gospel -- it is for washing the dishes, or for cleaning the car, or for talking to your neighbor over the back fence, or whatever, wherever. "Whatsoever you do, in word or deed" {cf, Col 3:17}, do all to the glory of God and by his grace. That is what Scripture tells us. There must be a continual sense that God is at work, strengthening you.

Imagine how encouraging that would have been to Timothy. He did not have to do this alone -- the Lord was with him. As Paul said to the Philippians, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure," {Phil 2:12b-13 RSV}. That is Christianity.

There is a second word of encouragement to Timothy here. Paul says that he also labored with the realization that he had been divinely appointed to this task, even though he did not deserve it: "He judged me faithful by appointing me to his service, though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him."

Paul never got over the wonder of the incident on the Damascus Road. He was on his way to that city to try to imprison all the Christians there -- "breathing out threatenings and slaughter" {Acts 9:1 KJV}, as Scripture puts it -- when he suddenly fell to the ground. There, in the glory of the light that shone around him, he learned who Jesus was. This was made more wonderful by the fact that eventually he came to see that what he once sincerely thought to be zeal and commendable activity for God was, as he puts it here, "blasphemy and persecution and insult" to the God of grace. Yet the Lord chose him.

Paul is not talking about being "called" into the ministry; he is talking about being called to be a Christian. We all share this with him. We are being asked to stand up and acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus over a world that, by and large (and increasingly so) has rejected him and wants nothing to do with him. It is our privilege to honor him and to testify to his grace in the hour of his rejection. There is coming a day when the whole universe is going to acclaim Jesus as Lord: "... every knee should bow, ... every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father," {cf, Phil 2:10b-11 RSV}. But what good will it do in that day when you are forced to bow the knee and acknowledge who he is? The privilege is to do it in a day when people are turning their backs on him. This is what the apostle sees as his, and Timothy's, ministry.

We too can see it as our ministry.

Timothy had no Damascus Road experience. Nobody else has. God does not call his people in the same way. We each have a unique experience of coming to Christ. (In the next paragraph Paul is going to remind Timothy that there were certain prophetic utterances which pointed to him. That was God's way of calling Timothy.) I do not know how he has called you, but somewhere along the line, if you are a Christian at all, there came a moment when you were aware of the quiet insistence of the Holy Spirit calling you, saying, "I want you." The Spirit of God does that. In a quiet moment, in ways that are unique to us, the Spirit of God says, "You are the one. Even though you have been my enemy, even though you have done hateful things, even though you didn't like me and didn't want anything to do with me, I want you. I have appointed you to be my spokesman."

But the most encouraging word in this passage is in this next section. There, the apostle says he was divinely forgiven -- in fact, he keeps on being divinely forgiven and changed -- by the mercy of God. Verse 13b:

... I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; {1 Tim 1:13b-15 RSV}

In this amazing statement, Paul is clearly indicating his awareness that, first, he received mercy because he was ignorant of what he was doing. Bad as his actions were, fighting against the Lord himself, persecuting the church, hounding Christians to death, at least, Paul says, it was not deliberate rebellion against light, against knowledge and truth he understood.

Young Saul of Tarsus thought he was doing right. We could say he could have known better. He had the Scripture; he should have known better. That is always true. Any of us could have known better than we did; we should have known better. Most of us have been exposed to far more light that we can handle. We could have avoided many of the things we have done. But, the fact is, Paul did not know any better; he was blinded. Thus, he was brought under our Lord's prayer on the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," {Luke 23:34}.

That is a great, compassionate prayer. It takes recognition of the fact that we do not understand life very well. It underscores one of the most frightening powers of sin -- its ability to deceive us, to make us believe lies and follow untruth and fantasy that lead us into difficulty and hurt. Yet we think that we are doing the right thing. The amazing thing is not that there are some people who do wrong and know it. Rather, the amazing thing is how many people think they are doing the right thing, yet they are tearing up their families and destroying their homes, wrecking their marriages, ruining their lives, and their health. All the time they think they are doing right, living good, clean, moral lives. That is the deceitful power, the blinding character of sin. God constantly works to bring light into our darkness; and Scripture warns us against continuing to sin when this light increases.

I think the question most often asked of pastors is, "What is the unpardonable sin?" I get letters all the time, saying, "I think I've committed the unpardonable sin. What do you think?" What is "the unpardonable sin?" people ask. The answer from the lips of the Lord himself, and confirmed by the apostles, is, to turn your back on Jesus. When the Holy Spirit has shown you clearly and unmistakably who he is, and what he can do, and

when you fully understand that (that is a rare condition that not many people arrive at; most of us labor on with a great degree of confusion and bewilderment), yet you still turn your back on him, then, Hebrews 6 tells us, "It is impossible to renew them again unto repentance, seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God and put him to an open shame," {cf, Heb 6:4-6}. That is the unpardonable sin.

There are many stages before you get there. I have always pointed out to people that if there is concern in their hearts to want to be right that clearly indicates they have not yet committed the unpardonable sin. Paul was there. He received mercy, he said. His proud ignorance was relieved by the sudden flash of light and knowledge on the road to Damascus. And, as he tells us here, "the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."

Those are very revealing words. When you come to Jesus Christ, two things, especially, are given to you:

The first is faith. Faith is the ability to see things realistically, the way they really are, to have all the illusions taken away and to begin to live in line with reality. It is very encouraging to understand that only Christians live realistically. We do not all do it so well at times but Christians are the ones who finally face life as it really is. It is the world that is confused, following after fantasies and chasing after rainbows. But when you become a Christian you see things the way they really are.

The second thing that is given to you when you come to Jesus Christ is love, a desire to reach out to someone else, to minister to the hurt in another person. Compassion awakens when you come to Christ. It is very helpful to us to understand this, because most of us struggle in this area. If you are not able to love very effectively, then, for heaven's sake, don't just try to do those things. That will get you nowhere. Draw near to Christ. He is the author of faith and the perfecter of love. When you draw near to him, when you let him love you, and you glory in his forgiveness, you will find your eyes being opened and your heart warmed. That is what Paul experienced. Love overflowed; it was abundantly given to him, he says. Not only at the beginning, but, as we will see in a moment, throughout his life.

But the apostle is not through. Now he gives us a special little formula of emphasis. Verse 15:

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. {1 Tim 1:15a RSV}

In the Gospels you find that Jesus speaks this way on occasion: "Truly, truly, I say unto you..." When you read that little formula in the Gospels, take your red pen and underline what follows. When he uses those words Jesus is simply saying, "Pay attention: This is important!" That is what Paul is doing here. Five times in his letters to Timothy he uses this little formula, "The saying is sure and worthy of all acceptance," and each time he is underlining a very fundamental statement. These were the memory verses of the early Christians. They did not go around with Navigator cards; they just put these verses into their hearts and memorized them.

This is the first of them:

"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

That sounds simple to us, yet it is very profound. All of us were mixed up, confused, bewildered, darkened in our understanding, alienated from the life of God. Read Paul's descriptions in Ephesians about what we were like before we came to Christ. Everybody -- brilliant minds, highly educated people -- everybody is in the same boat. Christ Jesus came to take away the darkness, unveil the mysteries, remove the illusions, reveal reality, and awaken love, compassion, mercy and ministry to others. This is the purpose of Christianity.

Then Paul says what is the most astonishing thing of all in this passage: "Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief," {1 Tim 1:15b KJV}. If he had said, "I was the chief," we would all understand that, because certainly he was in the forefront of the ranks. But now, looking back, his life almost over, he says, "I am the chief of sinners."

That causes many people a lot of trouble. They read those words and say, "Has Paul forgotten what he said in

some of his letters? Has he forgotten these words he wrote in Galatians 2:20, 'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God'? Has he forgotten what he said in Second Corinthians 5:17: 'If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come'? Surely he can't forget that he has been redeemed, he has been made righteous. He cannot call himself the chief of sinners." But he does.

Some commentators say that this is a kind of humble exaggeration, like we sometimes say, "I'm not all that good, really." I do not think it is false humility. Paul means every word of this. He has not forgotten what he has written. What he is thinking of is not what he is in Christ (because that was made righteous and delivered, the power of sin was broken), but he is thinking about himself as a total man living in a world of evil; he is thinking of himself as we have to think of ourselves, made whole in Christ, and yet with the flesh still active in our lives. We still struggle against it. It is no longer us, but an alien invader still able to exercise its deceiving power over us.

There is hidden here a very important principle that all of us will have to learn some time or other. Whatever the flesh once manifested itself to be in our lives -- some extreme form of evil, whatever we have done that is now, in our own sight, bad, ugly, something we are ashamed of -- we have to remember that *that* is an area of weakness that needs to be guarded very carefully, because we can return to that in an instant, no matter how long we have been Christians. That is what Paul is talking about. He is looking back on his life, remembering when he thought he was right, when he thought with all his heart that he was pleasing God, yet he was so wrong that he is now appalled to look back on it. He remembers now how pride once deceived him. That is what the Bible calls, "the sin which does so easily beset us," {Heb 12:1 KJV}. In some cases it is lust, in some cases it is temper, in some cases (as with Paul) it is pride.

All his life Paul had to struggle against being proud. In Second Corinthians 12, he said God helped him by giving him a thorn in his flesh to keep him humble, {cf, 2 Cor 12:7}. There was a lifelong struggle, and yet notice what Paul says (Verse 16),

... but I received mercy for this reason that in me, as the foremost [sinner], Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. {1 Tim 1:16 RSV}

Here is the second reason Paul gives why he received mercy. God looked over the whole crowd and found the proudest man of all, the man who was so conscious of his own abilities that it blew the fuse of reality in his mind. Because he was that way, and had to struggle with that all his Christian life, Paul says, the Lord deliberately chose him that he might be an example to others who had to struggle with any kind of besetting sin.

How patient Jesus Christ can be! How patiently the Lord had worked with this apostle! How often he had forgiven him! How many times Paul had caught himself acting in arrogance, or was tempted to so act, and had to run back to the Lord to confess his weakness and receive restoring grace! Paul now holds himself up as an example to Timothy and says, "Don't be discouraged. You may fail from time to time, but God is still with you. He is patient with you. He will pick you up right where you are and use you again. All you need to do is walk carefully and see that you keep close to his side. He demonstrated in me how patient he can be, how willing he is to work with somebody whose natural temperament is absolutely opposed to all that Christianity stands for."

That is so wonderful to Paul that he cannot contain himself at this point, so he breaks into praise (Verse 17):

To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. {1 Tim 1:17 RSV}

Paul's heart is moved to remember how gracious the Lord Jesus has been to him; how many times he has forgiven and restored him; how he has constantly, patiently, set himself against all the natural temperament of this proud, arrogant young Pharisee.

Prayer

Our Father, once we were blind; we could not see ourselves; we could not understand what was hurting us so badly; we could not see what we were doing to each other, how we were wrecking each other's lives and sabotaging each other's plans. Yet, Lord Jesus, you came and invaded our lives and began to take away the veil and to help us to see what we were like. Thank you for that. Thank you for the love that has bloomed within our hearts, the compassion and mercy that we feel both to others and to ourselves. Thank you for the healing of your Spirit, for the fact that we are recipients of your grace. Like the apostle, we pause to give thanks and to praise the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, to him be honor and glory now and for ever, Amen.

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By: Ray C. Stedman

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