

Guarding the Gospel

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 7th of January 2001.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Guarding the Gospel and is from 2 Timothy chapter 1 verses 8 to 18.

You may like to turn to page 966 in the pew Bibles in front of you 2 Timothy chapter 1 verse 8 to 18. It is easy, I think, to be embarrassed or ashamed at times for being a Christian.

Easy to be ashamed or embarrassed of the Gospel or of Jesus. For example, at work, when you're asked what did you do yesterday in the context of people partying on and having great times, sometimes you can feel rather embarrassed to say, well, I went to church and I had Christian fellowship.

Or if amongst your friends or work colleagues or family members you're confronted with some sort of what we would call blatant immorality, sexual, financial, whatever, sometimes we can feel embarrassed or ashamed to speak out against such behaviour.

[1 : 22] Maybe at work or in other social contexts you're under pressure to adopt the cultural practices of those around you, to have rude jokes and laugh at them, to gamble, for example, or to drink too much.

Sometimes it can be embarrassing to decline to be part of that because we're Christian. Or maybe you're attacked by a friend who knows you're a Christian and they think it's rubbish and so they keep having goes at you to mock the Christian faith when they hear stories of churches that fail or ministers that fail.

Sometimes you can feel ashamed in the context of that attack to state that you are a Christian and believe in Jesus. And sometimes we fear the stigma of fanaticism, for example, being placed upon us.

Sometimes we face the pressure of family members to keep our faith private, not to talk about it, not to share it. Sometimes it makes us feel embarrassed to say something about the gospel or about our faith.

Sometimes we're even mocked for being Christian. And that can be highly embarrassing when we face the ridicule of people around us who criticise and demean us and the Christian faith.

[2 : 44] I remember what that felt like several times from family and friends. From the school grounds to the retirement village, there are many situations in which it is easy to be ashamed or embarrassed of being Christian.

In our day and age, it's trendy to be new age or pagan or a bit of this and a bit of that, but it's not at all trendy or socially acceptable to be a Christian, a Bible-believing, evangelical Christian.

It was regarded in Paul's day to be the most shameful thing, to be in prison. And he was in prison writing the letter to Timothy. It was the place of lowest status in society, the place of being demeaned and deprived.

So shameful would it be to be in prison that often prisoners were left unattended and unprovided for because in those days you had to rely on family and friends to bring you your supplies in prison.

There was no government food supply generally for prisoners. But St Paul, writing from prison in Rome in the time of Nero the Emperor in perhaps the early 60s AD, is unashamed to be there.

[4 : 01] And he urges Timothy, his young protege, at this time the minister of the church in Ephesus back in western Turkey or Asia as it was then called, he urges him to be likewise, not to be ashamed of being a Christian, of being a minister for the gospel and a speaker of it.

And that's how today's passage begins following on from what we saw last week. Do not be ashamed, Paul says. Don't be ashamed because as he just said at the end of last week's passage in verse 7, a very important verse, God has given you not a spirit of cowardice or timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control.

So don't be ashamed because God's given you a spirit of power. Don't be ashamed firstly of testimony about our Lord. That is of speaking and preaching and living the gospel.

Don't be ashamed to confess your faith in him to use the words of our baptism service for example. And nor don't be ashamed of Paul, Jesus' prisoner.

Paul's in prison for the sake of the gospel. He's not there because he's done something immoral or something stupid. So don't be ashamed of Paul and presumably the implication is there were people in Ephesus saying to Timothy and to his church, oh we've given up on the gospel Paul preached.

[5 : 21] Look he's in prison. What a shameful place to be. We don't want to have anything to do with him. Timothy, don't you be embarrassed by your association with me and the gospel I preach is what Paul is saying here.

Don't be ashamed of the gospel and don't be ashamed of me, Jesus' prisoner in Rome is what Paul is saying. But rather join with me in suffering for the gospel.

Now for Paul he's suffering deprivation, he's suffering an inevitable and imminent death it seems. But that's not the only pain of suffering that Christians face.

Paul is not just talking here about the pain of physical suffering, of being beaten or beaten or physically abused for being a Christian. The pain of ostracism, of ridicule, of rejection hits deep, sometimes deeper than physical abuse.

That's the pain and suffering that Paul is inviting Timothy to join as well. Not just some physical deprivation but social ostracism, rejection, ridicule, mockery and so on.

[6 : 31] They're the sorts of times when we are tempted to shut up, when we're tempted to compromise our faith, when we're tempted to be ashamed and embarrassed of the gospel and of being a Christian.

Paul is saying don't be ashamed. Join with me in suffering, emotional or physical abuse, whatever it takes. Don't be ashamed. God's given you a spirit of power, love and self-control.

Don't be a coward. Don't be ashamed. Indeed, in such situations, rely on the power of God. It's not our own human resources that will sustain us under suffering but as he says at the end of verse 8, relying on the power of God.

The God who's given you a spirit of power, rely on him and his spirit to sustain you and strengthen you in the face of such suffering. Paul goes on then to develop this argument a bit.

He goes on to say that we ought not be ashamed because the gospel is so glorious. The first point he makes about that in verse 9 is that God has saved us with a holy calling.

[7 : 45] Yes, true, the gospel is basically about God saved us but I think the point Paul is making here is that God has saved us with or to a holy calling to live a holy life, to reflect the holiness of God himself.

See, we're not just saved from the past and left, we're saved from our past sins forgiven for them but saved for the purpose of holiness in life. And I think the point that, the reason why Paul makes that point here is that it's often our holiness of life reflecting God's own holiness that gives us cause for embarrassment and shame because holiness in life means that we'll be non-conformists in society.

It means that we'll be different from the world around us. Literally, we're set apart for God from the world and that difference seen in moral living, holy living, will often be the prompt for receiving abuse, ridicule, mockery, rejection from our society.

Paul is saying don't be ashamed of the holiness of life to which you've been called. Don't be ashamed to live godly, holy lives. That's what God saved you for, after all.

And that's what God is like, as the Bible keeps telling us. We ought not to be ashamed of Christian ethics. They are far from trendy in our society.

[9 : 17] They are under constant attack and increasing attack in our society, in our media and in our governments. We must not be ashamed of holding to and living Christian godly lives.

Secondly, he goes on then to say in verse 9 that God has saved us not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace.

It's so tempting to hold to a gospel that says something along the lines of I have contributed this to my salvation and the favour I receive from God.

There are plenty of versions of the gospel like that. Plenty of cults and sects sometimes going under Christian names that say that. That we can do it.

That we can contribute. That we can be good enough or earn in some way or some measure our salvation from God. The world is always on about self-achievement and self-independence and self-sufficiency.

[10 : 26] The things that we can do. The Christian gospel actually takes the carpet out from under the feet of such claims. It says really in effect that we're spiritually bankrupt.

That we offer and contribute nothing in effect to our salvation. It is as Paul says here not according to our works but according to God's purpose of grace.

We come empty handed to God. Salvation is a free and total gift from him. Now our world and many people don't like to hear that. People like to think that they've contributed something.

That we have some merit or some personal worth that we can contribute something to God here. But the gospel says no. It takes the carpet from under our feet.

But the glory of the gospel is that it's all grace. Salvation is entirely 100% God's gift to us. Now again I think that that sometimes leads to some sort of ridicule.

[11 : 29] Society says sometimes to Christians you're wimps. Religion's your crutch. You can't stand on your own two feet. You can't achieve and do what you ought to be achieving and doing.

When you're a Christian you're saying how sinful and bad you are and how you can't do anything that warrants God's favour. Well I don't want to be a part of that.

And often that sort of ridicule and mockery and put down from the world to Christians can trouble Christians. But let me say we come to God empty handed but salvation is his full gift of grace and that is a glorious gospel and it's nothing to be ashamed about because it's the truth of who we are and it's the glorious truth of who God is as well.

Society often will say in effect God helps those who help themselves. Come on get up on your own two feet and do it. the bookshelves are full of self-help material but the truth of the gospel is that God helps the helpless and that is better news than any other false gospel and it's nothing to be ashamed of.

The world may be full of pride in itself but we have something greater to boast in the glory of a gospel of grace. Nothing to be ashamed about at all.

[12 : 56] The third thing that Paul refers to about this gospel comes at the end of verse 9 and through verse 10. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.

Before we were born. Before the world was created. Before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. This is God's plan. This is God's purpose of grace as he's just said. It's not a new idea. It's not a new fangled invention that was invented in 30 AD or something like that.

It's God's original purpose that grace would be extended to us through Jesus Christ. But it is now being revealed Paul says through the appearing of our saviour Christ Jesus.

That is it's God's plan from before time began but now at the right time Jesus being born and living and dying and rising is God revealing to the world his purpose of grace fully and finally.

And then we're told about this Jesus who appeared that he abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. We look around us we see that death is not abolished.

[14 : 03] What does Paul mean? He's talking about final or eternal death. The final separation of people from God. Jesus' own death has abolished death has conquered death has taken the sting out of death so that there is life and immortality beyond death.

that's the result of the gospel of Jesus and of grace. Again it's nothing to be ashamed of. For a man on death row as Paul was the gift of life and immortality and the abolition of death is certainly not something to be embarrassed about but is a real and living hope to cling to with confidence.

Paul is alluding to Jesus' death and resurrection here the heart of the gospel. Nothing to be ashamed about he says. But rather it is there and there alone that the gift of immortal life is ours.

And that's not something to be ashamed of at all. Indeed this gospel that Paul has described here for any sinner as we all are is a gospel to glory in not to be embarrassed about.

And it's that gospel Paul says to which he was appointed as a herald, an apostle and a teacher. A herald I guess is somebody who like a town crier comes with a trumpet to announce some good news.

[15 : 29] It's the role of the evangelist to which Paul was appointed by God. He was an apostle one who witnessed the resurrected and risen Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus when he was converted.

and the apostle who's charged in particular with a mission to the Gentile world, the non-Jewish world around the ancient Roman Empire. And he's a teacher of it.

Not just one who converts people and plants churches but one who disciples and trains people in understanding the gospel. That's his whole raison d'etre. It's the reason for living.

It's his whole ministry and life was to be a herald, an apostle and a teacher of the gospel. And that is why, and that's the only reason why, Paul now suffers.

As he says at the beginning of verse 12, for this reason I suffer as I do. Not because he's a fallen church minister who's pilfered the funds from the plate or because he's committed sexual immorality or because he's been a heretic or because he's done anything stupid.

[16 : 30] He's in prison solely for being a preacher of the gospel. And he's not ashamed. Despite all the prisoners around him who no doubt for various reasons were ashamed.

And like so often the prisoners we see on television in court trials who hang their head low or cover their face over with their hands so they're not caught on TV, who are obviously ashamed and embarrassed about the situation in which they face.

Not so, Paul. Prisoner on death row facing death. He's not ashamed. He's not ashamed of being there because he's there for the sake of a glorious gospel.

people. He goes on to give one of the great statements of Christian confidence in scripture. He says, I'm not ashamed for I know the one in whom I have put my trust and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

Notice what St. Paul does not say at the beginning. He does not say, for I know what I put my trust in but rather I know the one in whom I put my trust.

[17 : 40] That is, he's not saying I'm not ashamed because I know the gospel. Here it is, it's point A, B, C and D. But I know the one in whom I put my trust.

That is, at its essence and heart, the Christian faith and gospel is about a relationship with God. It's not about a creedal formula. It's not a religious recipe or a philosophical plan.

It's not a statement of faith or a number of articles in essence. It's about knowing God personally. So when Paul comes to this great statement of Christian confidence and faith, he says, I know not a creed or a formula or a gospel presentation but I know God.

That's why I'm confident. That's why I'm not ashamed. I know God, the one in whom I have put my trust. Paul knows that this God will not let him down.

The God who saved him has saved him for grace not his own works, has saved him through the revelation of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection. Paul knows that that God will never let him down.

[18 : 49] What he's done in the past for him gives him even more confidence that he will hold on to him to the end, to that day. So Paul says, I know the one in whom I've put my trust and I am sure, I'm persuaded, I'm convinced, he says, that he is able to guard, set up a garrison if you like, or to protect, make sure that you don't lose something.

I'm sure that he's able to guard until that day, until the day when I arrive in heaven, until the day when Jesus returns, until the day when world history comes to an end, the day of my death.

death, he says, I know that he is able, powerful, has complete ability to guard to that day what I've entrusted to him, which is his life, his life forever.

Paul is entrusted by being a Christian, in effect, everything to God, and he knows that God is able to guard that life until that final day, beyond death at Roman execution, beyond the shame and embarrassment of prison, beyond its deprivations, the ostracism, the rejection, the beatings perhaps, Paul says, God can guard my life until that day.

Most of us, when we put money in a bank, think that it's going to be fairly safe, although occasionally banks fold. We tend to look for something safe that we can have some confidence in to guard our money, our savings or affairs.

[20 : 25] Some people in northern England have entrusted their lives to a doctor, and we've just heard in recent days that this doctor's probably killed up to 300 people, abusing their trust.

Paul is saying that even more confident than a bank, even more confident than a doctor, more confident than anyone else you can think of, he has confidence in God.

He will not let him down. He cannot let him down. There is nothing that can shake God's ability to guard what Paul has entrusted to him for that final day. Now, such confidence is not often found on Christian lips today.

See, it's sometimes when people talk about their death or going to heaven. Oh, I hope I'll get there. I think I might get there. I've been quite good or I've done this or that.

That's not the confidence Paul is expressing here. The confidence that Paul expresses in these verses is something that we ought to be able to share and declare with the same sort of assurance and confidence.

[21 : 30] For too many Christians, Christian hope is not much more than just wishful thinking. And one of the reasons for that, I think, is that we keep on being conned into thinking that we contribute something to our salvation.

to the extent that we offer God something to meet his offer to us, we will not have confidence. We cannot have confidence because we will fail at times.

But when we realise that the gospel is a hundred percent gift from God and nothing from us who are empty handed, then we can have real and absolute and lasting confidence because God is absolutely trustworthy.

But whenever we try to match God's offer somehow and think that God comes halfway so we meet him halfway or even if we think God is ninety-nine percent grace but there's something I've got to contribute in return, then we lose our grounds of confidence.

But the gospel is God a hundred percent and that is why Paul can be so thoroughly confident and assured here that on that final day Paul will be with God with eternal or immortal life forever in heaven because the gospel is a glorious gospel of grace.

[22 : 49] That's no reason to be embarrassed. That's no reason to be ashamed. It's no reason to be compromised in the face of opposition, subtle or blatant, physical or emotional.

That glorious gospel should give us confidence, not embarrassment, and assurance and not shame. And we do well to imitate Paul's confidence here.

And if his confidence is something that you cannot yet share, let me urge you to make effort to understand it and share it. It's so important that we as Christians fully understand this glorious gospel.

Otherwise we'll be crippled with doubt and we'll be embarrassed and ashamed all too often. So St. Paul then says to Timothy in verse 13, hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me.

Literally to hold fast to it, to grip it tightly, never to let it go, never to loosen one's grip upon it. He's talking there when he says the standard of sound teaching, he's talking about the content of the gospel.

[24 : 10] Not a formula that we recite parrot fashion word for word, but when he says the standard or the pattern or the model of sound teaching, he's talking about the content, even if we can express that content in different ways and in different words.

There's no one right formula. Paul's acknowledging that. He's saying you've heard me preach and teach the gospel, hold fast to that same gospel, he's saying to Timothy here.

This is the only Christian tradition that we must continue. It is the only Christian tradition that the Bible urges must be held onto without change from generation to generation.

From time to time people comment to me here and other places how sometimes the church is not as traditional as it should be and the changes are bad and so on. And ironically hardly ever are they talking about the content of the gospel.

It seems to me they are almost always talking about the trappings, the way things are done rather than what is done, the way things are done rather than what is said or believed.

[25 : 24] Those customs are secondary issues. They're not actually in the end the ultimate tradition. All too often what we think are traditional ways of doing things are rather quite modern.

The only Christian tradition that must be held is the content of the gospel of Christ. That's it. It must be held and it's the only thing that must be held.

Not to say some other customs and traditions are bad. Not to say that we've got to run after every new and modern idea. But this is the gospel that is non negotiable.

The tradition that must be held from generation to generation. And proper Christianity and proper Anglicanism as part of that believes this gospel and is not ashamed by it.

Paul gives Timothy this charge presumably because he's facing plenty of pressures to adopt another gospel or to loosen his grip on what Paul has preached. Probably because Paul's in prison and it looks as though it's a failure and people are ashamed by association with Paul so they're cutting their links with him and therefore wanting to cut links with Timothy or get him to cut links with Paul as well.

[26 : 42] The gospel is under attack with heretics in Ephesus it seems and maybe some attacks of immorality as well. That's nothing new then nor today.

The same thing happens time and again. the Christian gospel is under attack on all accounts and the churches are almost full of all sorts of false gospels or heretics.

There are plenty of liberal bishop sponges around in different churches. There's plenty of Christian preaching that is little more than self-help pop psychology. There's no place for that in a church.

The only place for preaching and teaching is the gospel that Paul modelled and that Timothy is being exhorted to hold on to. Nothing else. No other gospel. No other message.

No other theory will give the same grace, the same life, the same immortality, the same abolition of death as the Christian gospel does. So Paul says hold on to it.

[27 : 39] Guard it like treasure. Don't be ashamed of it. There's no reason to be ashamed of it because of all that it delivers by God's glorious grace. So Timothy is to guard it, to hold on to it, the good treasure, the gospel that is that's been entrusted to him, but not to do so in his own strength, but again coming back to the point made in verse 8 and verse 7, with the power of God given to him, relying on the Holy Spirit living in us.

Now Paul is not giving an idle exhortation here. He knows from bitter and personal recent experience that this is the pressure that Timothy faces and others have fallen for it. In verse 15 he gives a couple of examples of people who've lost their grip on the gospel and cut their ties with Paul and gone off onto other teaching presumably.

You are aware that all who are in Asia have turned away from me. Presumably that means some Christians from Asia, even Ephesus where Timothy is, who've been in Rome, who've given up on Paul and maybe gone back to Ephesus and maybe the cause of some of Timothy's problems.

They include Phygelus and Homogenes. We know little of them, but Timothy presumably knew who they were. Paul is saying don't be like them. Hold fast and guard the gospel.

But then on the other hand he gives a positive example as well. May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus because he often refreshed me, maybe providing food and drink, maybe just spiritual refreshment and fellowship, and he was not ashamed of my chain.

[29 : 11] When he arrived in Rome he eagerly searched for me and found me. May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day. And you know very well how much service he rendered in Ephesus.

So Onesiphorus was obviously known to Timothy and to the Ephesian church where Timothy is. He's a good example of someone who's held fast to the gospel, who's not ashamed of it and not ashamed of Paul in chains in Rome.

Be like him, Paul is saying to Timothy. Well for us there are many pressures as I've suggested for us to loosen our grip on the gospel and to be ashamed of it and of being a Christian and of Jesus.

When are you embarrassed about being a Christian? When have you been ashamed to declare your faith in the gospel and in Jesus Christ?

Are there even ways where you're suffering for the gospel now? If not physically, maybe emotionally. Well take encouragement from these words of Paul.

[30 : 16] Take encouragement from the gospel which is so glorious and offers such grace and immortal life. Take confidence from Paul's relationship with God which ought to be a reflection of our own.

For he knows that God is able to guard until our lives until that day. A day on which Jesus will be ashamed of those who now are ashamed of him. But a day also on which Jesus will welcome and vindicate those who today are not ashamed of him or his gospel.

In the end we've got no reason to be embarrassed or ashamed of this gospel, of our saviour or of being a Christian. We've got no reason for embarrassment about what Jesus came to do and did.

Indeed we ought to have every confidence in a wonderful God of grace. So let us, like Timothy was exhorted, hold fast to that gospel.

To guard it with our lives. Not to be ashamed of it. But to live it and proclaim it for Jesus sake.

[31 : 27] Amen.