

# Marks of Grace in a Servant of Christ

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**Bible Text:** 2 Timothy 1:1-14  
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Now, an occasion like this that we have the privilege of having from time to time in our church is an opportunity for us to reflect, of course, on what it means to be a minister of the gospel but much broader than that, it gives us an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ, and what it means for all of us who are Christian believers to be called into the service of Christ and into the service of the gospel. And so I want to turn to this passage in 2 Timothy. Actually Timothy was not what we would normally call a local minister, although he was ministering in a local situation. He was an evangelist, that is to say, he was a deputy of an apostle, and his great task was to fulfill the apostle's ministry in places where the apostle was himself absent. And so Timothy is in the situation to which the Apostle Paul himself had actually given most time in his ministry, some three years in the great city of Ephesus, and there the Apostle Paul is writing to him to encourage him, longing to see him towards the end of his life, especially because probably more than any single individual, the Apostle Paul had invested himself in Timothy. And so it's not surprising in these last words that he writes to Timothy, that he expresses to Timothy the things for which he is grateful in his life, and the things that he longs to see emerging in Timothy's life and ministry. And it's very striking that the chief thing Paul is concerned about is not so much the sphere in which Timothy has been settled; whether that be large or small, is entirely a matter of God's providence. What he is really interested in is what kind of person Timothy is going to be as a servant of Jesus Christ.

I'm reminded of some words I read first as a teenager, written, although I didn't know it then, by a chaplain in the Confederate Army, E. M. Bounds. He writes, "We are constantly on a stretch, if not on a strain, in the church to devise new methods, new plans, new organizations to advance the church and secure efficiency for the gospel. But men, men and women, are God's method. The church is looking for better methods, God is looking for better men."

And here the Apostle Paul is writing, as he says at the beginning of chapter 3, in the last days, the days between the glory of Christ's return and his final coming again at the end of the world. He tells Timothy in that same statement at the beginning of chapter 3 that during those last days there will be times of particular pressure on his life. And he's writing also, as you remember, conscious that these are his own final days, chapter 4 and verse 6, he has already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of his departure

has come. But Timothy is in his early days. He is a young man, somewhere probably around his early thirties and the Apostle Paul is, as it were, putting his final investment into this young man's service in the kingdom.

It's applicable to us at every stage of the Christian life, no doubt, but it's certainly applicable to any of us and to all of us who want to serve the Lord Jesus Christ fruitfully. And I want us to notice together in these minutes the particular things that draw Paul's attention as he writes these last words to his beloved friend, Timothy, because he highlights the chief characteristics of any individual who engages in any kind of gospel ministry. If you want to serve the Lord Jesus with some fruitfulness, then these things must in some degree be present in your life.

The first of them he mentions in verses 6 and 7, "I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit of power and love and self-control." The first prerequisite to serving the Lord is that we should have a heart for ministry. "Fan it into flame," he says. I don't think he's rebuking Timothy here as though Timothy's love for the Lord was dying. I think he's saying, "Timothy, there is a fire there, but we want to see it become an all-consuming flame in your life."

It's very interesting to notice how in these words Paul actually delineates the three essential things for anybody who wants to serve in any sphere of ministry. The first is that he mentions the gift of God. God has given us various gifts, and he wants us to use those gifts, not for our own promotion, but in the service of Christ and in the service of others. So he says this is not something that we enter into individually or individualistically, "I think I have this gift." No, he says, "I want you to fan into flame the gift from God that is in you through the laying on of my hands."

What does he mean by that? To put it very simply, he means this: that if we are gifted in the process of serving the Lord Jesus Christ, wherever we see need, the people of God will recognize and encourage us in that ministry. Sometimes people from outside our church here come along to me and they say, "If I become a member of your church, will I be allowed to teach in Sunday school?" Now my immediate thought is, "My friend, I have met you many times before, and here is the answer: if you become a member of our church, we are bursting with three-year-olds, and there is a tremendous opportunity for you to teach there." "That's not what I meant." And so I go through the ages, the four-year-olds, the six-year-olds, the seven-year-olds. "No," and it slowly emerges, "What I want is a platform for my gifts so that people may recognize my gifts." And so such people end up complaining, "Nobody recognized my gifts," but the reason nobody recognized your gifts was because you never served anybody. You never had your eyes opened to see what needed to be done, and like our blessed, lowly Jesus, were first of all prepared to wash dirty feet before you were ever, as it were, exalted to a place of responsibility and public ministry.

"And then," says Paul, "there's another thing that needs to be present, and that is that you are absolutely committed to service." If you asked me what I thought was the secret of Paul's fruitfulness, I would say this, he says it in 2 Corinthians 4, "We do not preach

ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves, your bondservants, for Jesus' sake." Now these two things should never be separable, but many believers seek to separate them. "Yes, I preach Jesus Christ as Lord." Well, the evidence of that would be, "I would be willing to bow down at your feet and look up into your eyes and say, 'Is there any way in which I can serve you?' Is there any way I can be your bondservant and exhaust myself for Jesus' sake in serving you?" And because the Apostle Paul had seen that as the great way of fruitfulness in his ministry, he wanted to see it as the great pattern of fruitfulness in the ministry of all Jesus' disciples, not least his friend Timothy. When people say to me over my ministry, when people say to me, "You know we need So-and-so be part of our staff or in our ministry," I always say I have two questions about them. First, are they gifted for this? And second, are they humble? Are they willing to serve the Lord's people?

So this is his commitment to ministry. The second thing that goes alongside that, and it's very striking to notice it in verse 8, he says, "do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner." A commitment to ministry and then a deep personal fidelity. First to the Lord Jesus. Now you might think having served years with the Apostle Paul, having seen people won for Christ in many different places, there would be no possibility that Timothy would ever dream of being ashamed. But Paul knows that that's a crisis he faces for the simple reason, as he goes on to say, all those who are faithful to the Lord Jesus will need to take their share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God. Last week, this week, the next week, you and I are challenged, will we be ashamed of Jesus? And the issue is not that we have nothing to say about Jesus, the issue is are we prepared to pay the cost of saying something about the Lord Jesus.

But what's so striking to me is that Paul does the almost unthinkable. In one and the same sentence, he says to Timothy, "don't be ashamed of the Lord Jesus, and don't be ashamed of me, his prisoner. Don't be ashamed of me when I'm marginalized. Don't be ashamed of me," as he says at the end of chapter 4, "when few Christians have stood by me. O Timothy, don't be ashamed of me then." And that's a real test of us as servants of the Lord Jesus. It's not how we get on with the rich and famous. It's an abomination that Christian organizations should show photographs of their leaders standing beside the President in the White House as a representation of the power of their ministry. That's an utter irrelevance to real ministry. The real characteristic of ministry is not how I am with those who are well, or prosperous, or intelligent, or easy to get on with, but whether I stand beside the Apostle Paul when he's in prison and he's been demeaned, or how I treat those who are lowliest in the congregation, or the little children, or even the difficult Christians who in every living congregation are to be found and rarely recognize themselves.

That's what it means not to be ashamed of Christ. How do I know that? Because if we're his, he wasn't ashamed to call them brothers, says the author of Hebrews. He wasn't ashamed to come and die for them. He's not ashamed to bring them to glory in all their weakness. And that's a great hallmark of real ministry and what often stands in its way is our own stinking pride that we think ourselves to be better than them, or more gifted than to engage in that kind of ministry. But Paul is saying it's one of the hallmarks of a real servant of Jesus Christ, not only that we have this commitment to ministry, but that it's marked by this deep personal fidelity that understands the words of the Lord Jesus when

he says, "Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, you have done it to me. When you do it to one of the greatest of these, you may simply be doing it to them or for yourself but when you do it to one of the least of these, my brothers," says Jesus, "you do it to me."

There's a third thing that accompanies that, to which the Apostle Paul goes on immediately. He says, "take your share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling." Devotion to ministry, personal fidelity, and consecrated sanctity. My, how we need to hear that today in our Christian lives, a passion to become holy for the Lord Jesus Christ, because that's what he's called us to be. And it's interesting, just at this point, Paul goes into one of these Paul-like spirals, and the next few sentences he brings the whole gospel to bear upon this matter, beginning in eternity and taking us right through the work of Jesus Christ, because he understands that it's all that Christ is and all that Christ has done for us that is required to make us lost sinners holy and for us to recognize that that's not an indifferent matter whatsoever in the Christian life. No holiness, no real fruitfulness. That's why Robert Murray M'Cheyne, as many of you will have read in his diaries and memoirs, writes, "Make me as holy as it's possible for a saved sinner to be." Is that what you want? Is that the driving thrust that lies behind your desire to serve the Lord Jesus Christ, that you want to be as unreservedly holy as it's possible for God to make you? Because this is what Paul seeks for Timothy, and that will lie behind the marvelous fruitfulness that he anticipates.

I remember many years ago being at an ordination service just like this, and at the end of the service, the local minister pointed me to the back corner of a church that was remarkably like this church, although it happened to be in Northern Ireland. He said, "Do you see that young man there?" And since they didn't use as much electricity in the evenings as they do here, I peered through the gloom and saw that young man. Do you know what he said to me? It shook me almost rigid because I'd so rarely heard the words. He said, "There is a holy young man." Is that your aspiration, young or old, or a matter of indifference? That's all Jesus is interested in. At the end of the day, what Jesus is interested in is making you holy and when he makes you holy, he'll take care of everything else in your life, your gifts, your sphere of service, your fruitfulness.

And so, among the many things that Paul says here, there are these three things I want us to have written into our hearts tonight, not only that we may pray intelligently and diligently for Paul Robelo, but that our own service may become really fruitful. Don't you find that a challenge in your Christian life? I think if we're real Christians today, we're almost bound to see that as a challenge in our Christian life. "Lord, I seem to have been so fruitless in my Christian service." And instead of simply saying, "Well, it's the times we live in, or I'm too busy," to say to myself, "Am I really committed to this ministry that God has given to me? Do I have this unmovable personal fidelity? And is Christ beginning to transform me so that measures of holiness and sanctity are beginning to emerge in this Christian life that I lead?"

It's interesting to me that the only person in all of Paul's letters to whom he writes the opening words grace, mercy, and peace, is Timothy. There is no church in the New Testament to whom he writes these words, or an individual to whom he writes these

words, but he writes these words to Timothy, because I think he understands that the sheer enormity of this calling could crush a young man in his spirit, and so he wishes to him not only grace to cover his sins, and peace to make stable his heart, but mercy to secure him in his weakness and in his frailty so that he may be ashamed neither of the Lord Jesus Christ nor of the Apostle Paul, his prisoner.

And it's a wonderful thing to read just at the end of the letter to the Hebrews, the announcement, the anonymous offer of the letter to the Hebrews makes to the Christians to whom he is writing when he says, "Timothy has been released." Timothy has been released. Released from where? Released from serving time in prison because he was not ashamed of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ nor of the Apostle Paul, Jesus Christ's prisoner.

It's a great encouragement to me in all my weakness, all my frailty, the sometimes overwhelming sense of one's utter inadequacy to serve Christ and he comes, and you notice he never minimizes the sheer force of the calling. So this is not just for Paul Robelo. My friend, this is for you. If you're 12 years old, it's for you. Or if you're 82 years old, it's for you. If you're going to be a fruitful servant of Jesus Christ in the years he gives you, then come and with me commit yourself to ministry and give yourself in fidelity and be utterly devoted to a life of sanctity, and then we really will be the servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray together.

*Our heavenly Father, we thank you with all our hearts for the grace and wonder of the gospel. We thank you that Christ's grace is so gloriously strong that it enables our lives to bear the most rigorous demands of the gospel. And we pray that you would stretch us by your grace and through your calling that we may grow strong and mature and fruitful in the service of our blessed Savior Jesus Christ. And this we pray together for his great name's sake. Amen.*