

The Making of a Christ-Centered Leader

Introduction to the Book of 2 Timothy

Introduction

I sense God wanting me to take you through the book of 2 Timothy. This podcast is for several things, but primarily it is for equipping you as a Group Leader. Equipping someone implies that there is something they are striving for, something they hope to become. I fear I may have never made it clear just what you are striving for, or what kind of leader I'm hoping you become. In thinking through what a healthy leader would look like, or what picture we are all striving for, I found myself drawn to the book of 2 Timothy.

2 Timothy is one of three letters in the New Testament written by the Apostle Paul to young leaders in the church. These three letters are traditionally called the “pastoral epistles” because they are what appear to be Paul’s wisdom for leading God’s people, which we usually think of in pastoral terms. While these letters, or books as we call them, are certainly for pastors, they also give us a picture of healthy leadership in the church, which would include you and the role you play as a Group Leader.

As you read through 2 Timothy, that picture of healthy leadership becomes clear. The book is about the making of a Christ-centered leader. It tells us what that looks like, what we must do to get there, and what it will be like as we make progress. But Paul makes his goal for Timothy clear—to become a Christ-centered leader.

We’ll get to the text of 2 Timothy soon, but before we get there it’s helpful to have some context that will bring Paul’s letter into sharper focus.

Brief Introduction to 2 Timothy

2 Timothy, as you might have guessed, is Paul’s second letter to the Timothy, a young pastor who had been trained by Paul for several years.

What sets 2 Timothy apart from Paul's other writings is that it was written in the last days of his life.

In this book you find an aging Paul writing in chains (2 Timothy 1:16) from the bowels of a dark, dank dungeon. He is cold and alone, save for Luke (the author of the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts), who probably wasn't allowed to be by his side much of the time. His days as a travelling Apostle are over. Later in the letter he can say of his life, "I have finished the race." Knowing the end is near, Paul sets his sights on making provisions for the passing on of the faith to the next generation. This is why he writes to Timothy, his most trusted worker whom Paul refers to as his "beloved child" (2 Timothy 1:1).

With that brief introduction in mind, three observations need to be made before moving on to the text itself.

1. Paul was a prisoner in Rome

The first is that Paul was a prisoner in Rome. I mentioned a minute ago that Paul was a prisoner in a dark dungeon. That dungeon was in Rome, and if tradition is correct then he was being held in the Mamertine prison, which one commentator described as a "dismal underground dungeon with a hole in the ceiling for light and air."¹ Wherever it was, Paul tells us that his friend Onesiphorous could only find him after an earnest and painstaking search (2 Timothy 1:16-17).

Paul was certainly in chains, as he himself attests to (2 Timothy 1:16). He was suffering from loneliness and boredom from his damp and cold imprisonment (2 Timothy 4:16-17). It seems Paul had already received a court hearing (2 Timothy 4:16-18) and was awaiting a full trial, which he expected to end in his execution (2 Timothy 4:6-8).²

This was not the first imprisonment for Paul, and not his first in Rome. But something was different this time. This time he would endure great hardship, and there would be no escape. This was around the year 64 A.D. when persecution of Christians was in full swing under the Emperor Nero, who would prove to be one of the faith's fiercest adversaries.

¹ William Hendriksen, *The Epistles to Timothy and Titus*, p.234

² Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, p. 133

Sensing his fate, Paul penned his letter to Timothy, calling him to guard the faith and ensure its passing on. It is a very personal letter, as you'll see, but Paul would have also viewed it as a last will and testament to the church.

Now that you have a sense of what Paul's life and motives for writing the letter, let's shift our focus to Timothy.

2. Timothy was being thrust into a position of Christian leadership far beyond his natural capacity

The second observation that needs to be made is that Timothy was being thrust into a position of Christian leadership far beyond his natural capacity.

Timothy was obviously the intended audience of the letter, as Paul addressed it to him in the letter's opening. Timothy had been Paul's faithful companion for more than fifteen years at the time of the letter's writing. He had been recruited by Paul when the Apostle was in Lystra, and this young recruit proved to be loyal, sticking with Paul through some of his harshest missionary journeys.

Paul's affection for this young leader is evident in his references to Timothy throughout his letters to various churches. Paul called Timothy his "beloved and faithful child in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 4:17), his "fellow worker" (Romans 16:21), and his "brother and God's coworker" (1 Thessalonians 3:2).

Because of his close relationship with Timothy, it's not surprising that after his first imprisonment Paul left Timothy in charge of the church at Ephesus. This fledgling pastor's responsibilities were numerous: he was to refute the heretics stirring up trouble in the church, order the church's worship, select, and train elders, establish a steady ministry to the church's widows, command and teach the faith as handed down by the Apostles, and do all of that while maintaining a Christ-like character. And if that wasn't enough, now Timothy's trusted mentor was facing martyrdom.

Humanly speaking, Timothy was hopelessly unfit for these weighty responsibilities of leadership in the church. There are at least three reasons why this was the case.

First, Timothy was relatively young for leadership in his day. Paul's first letter to Timothy encouraged him not to let anyone despise him for his youth (1 Timothy 4:12). Though we don't know for sure how old Timothy was at this time, based on context and what we know of his culture at the time, it would be safe to assume he was in his early thirties. Having just turned thirty this year, I can say that Timothy was inheriting an enormous amount of responsibility for man his age.

A second reason why Timothy was humanly unfit for his newfound responsibilities is that he was always sick. For some reason, he was prone to sickness, so much so that Paul mentioned his "frequent ailments" and told him to stop drinking water only and instead to drink a little wine, which was helpful for controlling stomach infections in that day (1 Timothy 5:23).

The third reason Timothy was unfit for the task at hand is that he was timid by nature. If you read through the biblical material on Timothy you'll find he seems to have been naturally shy, and would almost certainly be called an "introvert" by today's standards. Paul knew Timothy's weakness, which is why you'll see that Paul continues to exhort him to take courage and endure suffering throughout 2 Timothy.

So here's Timothy—young and in over his head, always fighting a cold, and timid to a fault—finding himself in charge of a gospel to proclaim and a group of people to watch over. And like Moses, Jeremiah, and a bunch of others in the Bible, he was reluctant to accept these responsibilities.

Does that sound familiar? Maybe you find yourself leading a group for the very first time, or leading in the church for the very first time, and you feel out of your league and in over your head. Maybe you're young in age or in the faith, shy and timid, yet you find yourself called to lead God's people.

You'll find this letter is full of treasures for all the Timothy's out there. Because Paul's advice is not to suck it up and try harder; it's to lean further into the gospel and draw from its power. Yes, Timothy was unfit for the task

he was called to in human terms, but he had something more to draw from living inside of him—the Spirit of the living God.

3. Paul's preoccupation in writing to Timothy is passing on the gospel

Our third and final observation about the book of Timothy is that Paul's preoccupation in writing this letter is passing on the gospel.

For 30 years or so, Paul preached the good news, planted churches, defended the truth, and encouraged the saints. His work was to bring the gospel to the nations, and he had succeeded, which is why Paul could write, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7 ESV). All that awaited him now was the crown of righteousness, which he would soon be receiving after his execution.

But what about the gospel he lived for, and would soon die for? Who would guard it, teach it, and pass it on? Nero was trying his best to extinguish the faith and exterminate its followers. Who would take up the mantle of preaching, teaching, and exhorting the church to press forward the mission of Christ?

Well, Timothy, and others like him. Which is why Paul reminded Timothy that the precious gospel was now committed to him—that it was now his turn to assume responsibility for it. Timothy was charged with protecting, teaching, and spreading this gospel to the next generation in the corner of the world he found himself leading.

Timothy was the recipient of the letter and the subject of many of its commands, but ultimately Paul wanted to pass on the gospel of Jesus. Of this gospel, Paul wrote, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4 ESV).

The gospel—the good news—of Jesus was Paul's primary concern, and he urges Timothy to make it his.

Throughout our study of 2 Timothy, you'll find yourself being urged to make it yours as well.³

Reflection Questions

1. Do you identify with Timothy—in over your head and called to lead beyond your capacity?
2. How could it be a good thing that you feel unfit for your leadership role? What might your weaknesses reveal? Where do they cause you to look for help?
3. To know how God wants to use you, you must discover your strengths *and* your weaknesses. Your strengths hint at *where* God wants to use you, but your weaknesses reveal *how* he wants to use you. What are your wordly weaknesses? (Are you not that smart, uncomfortable around people, slow to understand, awkward, do you have a speech impediment or handicap?) How might God want to work through your weakness?
4. How do Paul's leadership concerns differ from yours?
5. Paul told the Corinthian church that his primary concern was passing on the gospel. If you asked your group or others you lead what your primary concern is in leading them, what would they say?

³ I am indebted to John Stott's *The Message of 2 Timothy* for much of this introduction.