

GUARDIANS OF THE GOSPEL

A sermon on **2 Tim 1:8-2:7** | January 2 & 3, 2016 | by Alex Kirk

Today I will be speaking from 2 Timothy. Now the reason I have decided to speak from this text is because I have accepted a position to work full time with a missions organization called Training Leaders International. In my role with TLI, I will be teaching courses for pastors in the developing world who have no access to formal theological education. I have been invited to share this morning, because you guys—Christ Community Church—are partnered with us as our official sending church. **2 Tim 2:2** is something of a theme verse for our organization, and so I thought we could look at the larger passage together this morning as a way for me to both introduce the need for the work I will be doing as well as for us to think about our collective Christian vocation together at the beginning of the new year. At the end of the message, after we celebrate communion, I'll show a four-minute video that will talk more specifically about the work I'll be doing with TLI and how you can partner with us.

2 Tim 1:8-2:7 (ESV)

8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, 9 who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, 10 and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, 11 for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, 12 which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. 13 Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 14 By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

15 You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes. 16 May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, 17 but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me—18 may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day!—and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus.

2:1 You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, 2 and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. 3 Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 4 No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. 5 An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. 6 It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. 7 Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything

Prayer

INTRODUCTION:

I want to begin this morning with a confession. As I studied this text this week I realized that I have often let shame keep me from clearly explaining the gospel and from talking about the work

that Christ has done in my life. Meghan and I have been living in Toronto for the past year and a half, and Toronto, is an incredibly diverse and incredibly secular place. I am not holding that against it (**Jon 4:1**), but for me it was often a bit of a culture shock. I can't tell you how many times we got blank stares when we told people we were Christians or we told people we went to church. We often got asked, "So what are you—religious?" Slowly but surely, the values of the place—the high-end clothes, body image obsession, exotic restaurants—all start to seep into you, and pretty soon you are rating yourself by the number and intensity of new experiences you've had, or your knowledge and depth of engagement with the pop culture of the moment. What this meant for me is that I began to grow ashamed of confessing that I had been a pastor, that I was in grad school studying Bible, that we were Christians who went to church *every* week. I didn't feel like any of those things caused my stock to rise in the eyes of the city. None of these things got me any honor or prestige. What is more, in the face of relentless news stories about LGBT equality and religious violence, I began to feel ashamed to talk about what I believed the Bible teaches. It all just sounded so crazy. I found myself desperate to avoid any conversation that headed toward religion, hot button political topics, or my Christian beliefs. I was terrified that I would be exposed and people would think less of me; they would find me backward, ignorant—or worse—boring. I realize now I had become ashamed of the gospel.

I share this confession in part because I believe that many of you will resonate with my experience. Isn't this our tendency—**to be ashamed of the gospel, abandon our posts, and avoid suffering?** This tendency in our hearts presents a massive danger for the Church and the gospel—if we all abandon our posts because of shame and the fear of suffering, there will be nothing left and massive damage will come to the world, the Church, our communities, and our own souls. **We must not be ashamed to suffer in order to guard the gospel.**

DOCTRINE:

We can see this in our passage by tracking with three major charges that Paul gives to Timothy: I. Do not be ashamed but share in suffering (**1:8; 2:3**), II. Guard the gospel (**1:13, 14; 2:2**), III. Be strengthened (**2:1**).

I. You will only be willing to suffer for the gospel once you have laid aside your shame.

A.1. Look again at what Paul writes to Timothy in **1:8**, "*Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner.*" To understand our passage you must really imagine the historical situation. For those of you who aren't sure, Paul was something of a missionary/pastor/church-planter and Timothy was one of his apprentices. In 2 Timothy Paul is writing to Timothy from jail in Rome and things are not going particularly well. "*At my first defense,*" he writes, "*no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me*" (**4:16**). He can name real individuals like you and me who have deserted him and abandoned their posts—Phygelus and Hermogenes (**1:15**), Hymenaeus and Philetus (**2:17**), Demas (**4:10**). This is shame at work. **Shame tempts us to abandon the gospel.**

You see, **in Paul's world social standing in the community was based on honor and shame.** You would strive to do things that brought you honor in the public eye and to avoid things that brought you shame. Good and bad were essentially defined by the approval of "the human court of opinion."¹ Paul acknowledges two things that Timothy would be likely to be ashamed of. **1.)** *the testimony about our Lord* (nothing was so shameful as crucifixion, so swearing allegiance to a crucified God was pathetic) and **2.)** *me his prisoner* (Paul, who claims to serve this crucified God, is now disgraced and abandoned "*bound with chains as a criminal,*" **1:8; 2:9**). Paul is writing Timothy then, saying, come stand in this shame with me. This is the same challenge we face daily as followers of Christ. You must decide, consciously or unconsciously, whether you will embrace the shame that comes from following Christ. So how do we do it? How do we overcome shame?

2. If you want to overcome shame you need a different court of opinion. Dr. Brené Brown, a scholar who was trained as a social worker and therapist, has done exhaustive research on shame and vulnerability in our culture, and she has observed that the thing that undermines shame the most and enables courage and vulnerability is a deep personal sense of worthiness.² If you have believed in Jesus Christ for your salvation, then God has pronounced you worthy and there is no one who can say anything else.

In the early nineteen thirties as Hitler was seizing power in German, the Nazis slowly consolidated all aspects of society around their racist Aryan agenda. As they did so, they excluded and exterminated one by one any group of people who did not fit into their plans of domination and expansion for the Aryan race. As Hitler's propaganda machine shifted its rhetoric into full gear, honor and shame were solidified along racial lines. Aryan=honor. Mentally ill, handicapped, Roma, Pole, and of course, Jew were badges of shame. In 1933 the "Aryan clauses" started to appear in laws regulating professional and civil services. These laws barred anyone from employment who could not prove four generations of pure Aryan heritage. Soon afterward the churches were brought under the control of the Nazi regime and church leaders were required to stand before a Nazi official and swear allegiance to Hitler and the Nazi agenda. Almost all of them did. That was the pervasiveness of the Nazi efforts to redefine good and bad and the extent of the cultural honor that had built up around Arianism as well as the fear of breaking rank (which was also shameful!). But not everyone agreed. As the Nazis took control of the churches, one pastor, Martin Niemöller, started the Pastors' Emergency League which drafted its own confessions and refused to bend the knee to Hitler. By its second year there were 7,036 pastors enrolled (including Bonhoeffer and Barth). And when these pastors refused to honor the Nazi muzzling order placed upon their pulpits, Niemöller was summoned to appear before Hitler. At that meeting Niemöller is reported to have said, to Hitler's face, "You have said that I should leave the care of the German people to you, I am bound to declare that neither you nor any power in the world is in a position to take from us Christians in the Church the responsibility that God laid upon us for our people."³

I am not sure I have ever heard of truer or more brave thing than that. For his unremitting resistance, Niemöller would spend 7 years at Dachau. What gives you that kind of courage? The willingness to throw your lot in with the shamed whatever the cost? It can only come from a deep sense of worth based on the verdict of God. Scripture urges us not to look to the human court of

opinion to define good and bad, but rather to look to Christ Jesus, **1:9-10**, “*9 who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, 10 ... who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*” You see, if you have believed in Christ, there is no reason for you to ever be ashamed because, Christ chose you on the basis of his grace and not because of anything you have done. That thing you are most deeply scared by, most ashamed of, means nothing because Christ gave you a purpose and grace before time began. This is why Paul can so confidently say, **1:12**, “*I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed.*”

What is your court of opinion? What or who defines good and bad? Is there a person, people, or some other source that you have let define your worth? What is it like? Don't you want to be free of that? What would it look like for you to wake up tomorrow and truly believe that you have nothing to be ashamed of because you believe in Jesus and he has called you worthy? **If you want to overcome shame you need a different court of opinion.**

B.1. Once you have laid aside your shame you must be willing to suffer. Notice how there are two commands to suffer like bookends around the entire passage? **1:8**, “*Therefore do not be ashamed ... but share in suffering*” And again in **2:3**, “*Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.*” **So what does it mean to suffer?**

Although suffering for Paul has meant imprisonment, it would be wrong to assume that the path of a faithful Christian leads inevitably to jail as its ultimate goal. Rather we must fulfill our calling and welcome whatever suffering comes with it. In short, **suffering means sticking to your post.**

We see this in the three illustrations that Paul himself brings forward. Look at **2:4-6**, “*4 No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. 5 An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. 6 It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.*” In all three of these examples it is single-minded focus on a goal that is in view. The soldier pictures dedication and total allegiance to their commanding officer, the athlete must be entirely focused in every area of their life if they hope to win the prize, and the farmer is the picture of hard work, up before dawn, willing to work whatever hours are required to bring in the harvest. Now, here's the key—**in each one of these pictures there will be suffering inherent in accomplishing the goal.** Perhaps with the **solider** the suffering is most obvious—you may face death, injury, and the brutalities of war. But the suffering of the **athlete** is also intense. Think about the single-minded focus and extreme training that is required of an olympian. Everything you eat, everything you do, all has to be calculated toward that goal. If you want to win you must be willing to sweat, tear muscle, set bones, gasp for breath, and give up a million other ways that you could be spending your time. Finally, the **farmer**, **Gen 3:17-19**, “*Cursed is the ground because of you; / in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; / 18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; ... / 19 By the sweat of your face / you shall eat bread.*” The farmer is the biblical paradigm for hard work in a cursed world, always taking two steps forward and one step back. Breaking his back only to have his efforts foiled by weather he cannot control. Thus Paul goes on to charge Timothy in **4:5**, “*As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.*” **Suffering means sticking to your post to fulfill your ministry.**

2. What does suffering at your post look like? It might take you to prison in Rome, it might take you Dachau, or it might allow you to live in the suburbs of Daytona Beach, but it will involve suffering, because that is what it means to strive to live a life that honors God in a broken world.

God wants you to imagine yourself as a soldier, an athlete, a farmer. See, sometimes, in order to be able to endure the work or suffering that has been placed before us we have to put it into a larger story. You are not just staying home with the kids, you are a farmer working against the weeds and thorns to raise the next generation of faithful believers to honor God. You are not simply an accountant or administrator, you are a soldier, in the trenches everyday to keep the books balanced, the organization above board. You are not merely a student overwhelmed by the changing circumstances of life, you are an athlete running the race of faith. The Christian life will be enriched immeasurably if you see yourself, if necessary, as enduring suffering for Christ day by day and hour by hour. Stick to your post, run one more lap, keep your hand on the plow. Hold on.

II.A. Sandwiched between this twice-repeated command to suffer is the the central charge of the letter. **You must not be ashamed to suffer, because it is our task to guard the gospel.**

Look at **1:13-14; 2:2** “*13 Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me... 14 guard the good deposit entrusted to you. ... 2 and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.*” Like the three illustrations of the soldier, athlete, and farmer, these three commands (follow, guard, entrust) boil down into one—guard the gospel.

What emerges from these three commands is that there is a set of truth, of doctrine, preserved in Scripture, that has been given to the Church and to her leaders as a sacred trust. Fundamentally, this doctrine is the gospel, the testimony about our Lord (**1:8; 2:8**). This doctrine must be followed, guarded, and passed down. This is the special task of the Church and her leaders, but by extension it is each and every one of our tasks.

At about the turn of the third century—seventeen hundred years ago—in Alexandria, Egypt, there was born a man named Athanasius. Athanasius was apprenticed to the bishop of Alexandria, and grew up to succeed him. There was an elder in the Alexandrian church who came up with Athanasius named Arius. Now Arius began teaching the doctrine that Christ was the first *created* being, of a different essential substance from the Father. In other words Jesus was not divine, was not true God of true God, but was rather made. Arius’s ideas spread like wildfire. In part this was because they made sense to people brought up on Neo-platonic, pagan philosophy, as most educated people were, but also because Arius was a master of public relations. If he was alive today he would have had a brilliant social media campaign. In Athanasius day he turned his theology into catchy jingles that common people could sing while at their work. In this way, there was a time when Arius had convinced most of the Church, including the Roman emperor and many powerful bishops, that Jesus was not God. As one scholar said, Athanasius woke up one morning and the whole Church was Arian. But Athanasius would not budge on the biblical teaching that Jesus and the Father are one and the same God. Because Athanasius staunchly opposed Arian theology he was the target of violence, threats, and false accusations. He was accused of heinous crimes and forced to travel to far away cities at great personal cost and danger to defend himself in court. More than once the authorities came

for Athanasius while he was preaching or administering communion and his elders had to form a human shield while he fled. All in all, he was exiled from his home five different times during his life for a total of 17 years, the last time as an elderly man. The phrase “*Athanasius contra mundum*” which means “Athanasius against the world” was coined to describe his ministry, but in the end the truth about Jesus that Athanasius worked so hard and suffered so much to defend won out by the grace of God—largely through his efforts. To this day, his theological works like *On the Incarnation of the Son of God* and the Nicene Creed, which he helped to develop, stand as some of the greatest documents of the Christianity faith. If Athanasius had not been willing to suffer in order to guard the gospel it could have been lost.⁴

APPLICATION:

B. Although much of Athanasius’s thinking is intricate and complex, we are not talking here about esoteric theological debates. More than once in the 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul tells Timothy, “*Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies*” (2:23). **You must guard the gospel because it is the truth about Jesus that changes lives.** You see, for Athanasius, this was not abstract truth for abstract truth’s sake. He could see clearly that if the Church moved away from the deity of Christ, the entire basis of salvation would be lost. How could a created and therefore finite being, open to corruption, adequately bear the sin of all humanity and satisfy the justice of God? Christ is able to save us because he is *fully* God and *fully* man. If the Church had ultimately followed Arius, then slowly but surely the faith would have disappeared—collapsing back into pagan mysteries, experimental philosophies, and moral striving.

Now, there is a danger here. I am afraid that many of you may think, well, I am not a Christian leader, pastor, missionary, or professor, much less a particularly intellectual person. First, **know that every Christian has a role to play.** You must understand that this task of guarding the gospel is ongoing in every generation. Remember **Deut 6:6-7**, “*6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.*” You have been posted somewhere. It is our task as the Church to guard the gospel. **What does guarding it from your post look like?** For many of you it will be your lack of shame and willingness to suffer that will be your primary service. *Following* the pattern of sound words—i.e., living it—is part of what it means to guard the gospel. It might also mean better educating yourself about foundational doctrines so you can teach your children, encourage your spouse or roommates, or even just preach the gospel to yourself more effectively. What is one actionable step you can take toward being a better guardian of the faith? Consider being discipled or discipling someone. If you are looking for something to read or a way to grow in the practice of your faith, seek out a more mature Christian whom you respect and get their advice. You can always speak to me or any of the pastors here and they would love to help you.

C. The truth about Jesus changes lives, but false gospels destroy lives. (In light of the work we’ll be doing with TLI, here’s two examples from Africa.) Today in much of the world, the thing that passes for Christian theology is what is sometimes known as “The Prosperity Gospel” or the “Health and Wealth Gospel.” The big idea here is that God is about making you happy in

the here and now. God wants you rich, so you should partner with God by faith to lay hold of riches now. This takes many forms, some are more sly and palatable than others, but at the end of the day it is a pyramid scheme, where the charismatic leader at the top grows rich while the struggling people at the bottom “sow seed in faith,” i.e., give of their hard earned and humble salaries, in the hopes that God will bless them. The lie is perpetuated by the wealth, power, and prosperity of the preachers who hold themselves up as examples of what can happen to you if you just have faith—and give them money. This thinking started in America but we have exported it around the world. Now in places like Africa, charlatan preachers have combined the televangelist with the posturing of an African dictator and the promises of the village witch doctor. The result is massive churches filled with desperate people, losing themselves in hollow promises and an immersive “worship” experience. Why is this so poisonous? Well, while there is a seed of truth in this approach—God does want you to have your best life now but it does *not* consist primarily in material blessings—at the root it is *another gospel* because it does not proclaim Jesus Christ *crucified* to pay for your sins so that you can have a relationship with God and *eternal life*. It is offering something far far less significant, and something that it cannot deliver. Is it any wonder then that according to Zambian pastor, Conrad Mbewe (Mm-bay-way), Nigeria, the African country most responsible for exporting this type of false gospel is also well known as the most corrupt country on the continent.⁵ Evil teaching leads to evil living.

False gospels destroy lives, but the truth about Jesus changes lives. Take the story of Jacob.⁶ Jacob is 30 years old and today he is a farmer in northern Uganda. At the age of 13 he was abducted along with his two younger brothers and forced to fight as a child soldier in the Lord’s Resistance Army led by the infamous Joseph Kony. Jacob was separated from his brothers, and lived under constant fear of death. Forced to commit atrocities he was made to participate in massacres of entire villages. Eventually, reunited with one of his brothers the two escaped. They ran barefoot for many kilometers, hiding and sleeping in trees, until they finally made it back to their home village. Although they were welcomed home, Jacob was paralyzed by fear, depression, and anxiety. When he laid down to sleep he dreamed over and over of lines of soldiers walking by in single-file, saying, “Jacob—please—come and get your gun.” “At night when I would have these dreams,” Jacob said, “during the day I was not OK.” Jacob thought his problems were insurmountable. But then an organization called Tutapona came to Northern Uganda offering gospel-centered trauma counseling to the people of this war-torn region. Jacob said there were many NGO’s in the area offering food and clothing but these organizations did nothing to address his deeper needs. “I think they should have sent Tutapona first,” Jacob said, “They taught me to leave my burden to God if I want to have a happy life.” **What changed Jacob?** It was the gospel—the message of forgiveness for sins and restoration to God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. **The truth about Jesus changes lives where nothing else can.**

IV. In order to guard the gospel, you must be strengthened by the grace of Jesus Christ. Do you see not how this theme runs through everything Paul is telling Timothy? **1:8** “*share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.*” **1:14**, “*By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit.*” **2:1**, “*be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.*” If we are truly to find the power to guard the gospel by turning our backs on shame and embracing suffering we will only get it by the power of God from the gospel.

You see, the truth about Jesus, is that he was true God of true God, but he came and took on our shame. Abandoning the glory that was his, he humbled himself even to the point of enduring the most shameful and intense suffering as he was crucified for our sins. This is the gospel! Jesus was not ashamed to suffer so that you could be freed from sin and death—and if that is what God thinks of you, what reason could you ever have to be ashamed? Jesus Christ is your new court of opinion and he says, “Worthy!”

I present you with these stories from church history and the global church because it is crucial that you have perspective and you put your story—your life in Daytona Beach—into the story of Christ and his Church that includes Niemöller, Athanasius, and Jacob. I am well aware that here in this room there is deep hurt, abuse, loneliness, and suffering. I don't share these stories with you to minimize your pain and suffering, but rather to encourage you, because if Christ can strengthen Athanasius, if he can give Niemöller the courage to confront Hitler face-to-face, if he can begin to heal Jacob—he can also strengthen you. When you catch yourself feeling ashamed of the gospel, or ready to abandon your post, or thinking that doctrine does not matter, remember that your brothers and sisters in Christ have endured unimaginable suffering and even died for this message. You fight alongside them as guardians of the faith. ***Do not be ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes (Rom 1:16). Suffer at your post. Guard the gospel. Be strengthened. Amen.***

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, AB 35A (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 358. The entire discussion of honor/shame is indebted to pp. 357-59.

² Brené Brown, “The Power of Vulnerability,” from https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en

³ Sarah Williams, “The Churches and Fascist Totalitarianism,” History of Christianity II, Regent College, 2009. MP3 lecture.

⁴ Sarah Williams, “The Church in the Christian Empire,” History of Christianity I, Regent College, 2008. MP3 lecture.

⁵ Taken from Conrad Mbewe, “Nigerian Religious Junk,” Feb 20, 2011: <http://www.conradmbewe.com/2011/02/nigerian-religious-junk.html>

⁶ Taken from the Tutapona blog, Jan 29, 2015: <http://www.tutapona.com/#!/blog/c1jgg>