

Guard the Gospel
Mark 8:31-38; 2 Tim 1:1-17

28 Nov. 2010
HPC Morning

[Introduction]

During the Cultural Revolution in the 60's, my grandpa risked his life to save some gold bars for the family. Just in case we ran out of the money we would still be able to survive. During those days the Red Guards specifically targeted rich families, searching for anything valuable and confiscating them. Anyone who tried to hide money from the Red Guards, once it were discovered, would face severe persecution, or possibly even be beaten to death. During that time, my grandpa lost his factory, his house, and lots of money. But he still had a big family to feed and survive. What's the alternative? He had to save some treasures for the future, even at the risk of his life.

So he hid some gold bars. He used to run a tea container business, so there were a lot of wooden boxes at home. He laid the gold on the bottom of a box and covered it with another board, and then put that box with the rest of the other boxes. He did such a great job that no one ever discovered the gold.

We need to guard our treasures to ensure that our future has hope. The gospel is also a treasure - a good, noble and precious treasure. In fact, it is the most precious treasure in the entire world. Here in 2 Timothy 1, Paul is telling Timothy, “Guard this treasure. Deposit it for safe keeping in the church. Christ had entrusted it to me. Now I entrust it to you until Christ returns.”

[Context]

2 Timothy is Paul's final letter written shortly before his death. It's like Paul's “Swan Song”. In this letter, Paul exalts Timothy to be bold and to guard the gospel in spite of suffering. Paul calls on his disciple, his young coworker, his “dear son”, to continue the fight of faith, even as he himself approaches the end of his own life.

When Paul wrote the letter, he was in Nero's prison again. There was intense persecution going on at the time and the young church was probably severally damaged. The new believers saw Paul's arrest and probably started to doubt if this Christian movement would last. Many deserted him. Also, false teachings continued to be a problem. Under these circumstances, Paul wrote Timothy this final letter to encourage him. First things first, he charges Timothy to guard the gospel because Paul knows that the gospel is the only precious treasure that will preserve and sustain the church.

So, let's take a closer look at the passage and see what Paul has to say to us. There are two simple questions I want to raise:

What is the gospel that we guard?
How do we guard this gospel?

Question No. 1: What's the gospel that we guard?

In vv. 8b-10, Paul says, *“But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”*

Here, Paul affirms that this gospel is **God's** gospel. God has saved us in Christ Jesus according to His purpose, call and grace. It is not by our own work.

What's the gospel? In these two short verses, Paul presents a profound and complete overview of the gospel.

God saves and forgives.
God calls us to live a holy life.
God gives immortality and delivers us into eternity.

Here are God’s three purposes: God justifies. God sanctifies and God glorifies His people. God pardons sinners. God transforms them into people who reflect the image of His own Son Jesus. And finally God totally restores them to be like Christ in Heaven.

Pay attention here. All this is done **by God** through Jesus. In v. 9, Paul says “*not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace is given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,*”

This verse reminds me of another verse in Ephesians 1, where Paul praises God the Father of the Lord Jesus because “*he chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.*” God has a definite, firm plan from the very beginning. He executed His plan perfectly through His obedient Son, v.10 says, “*it (the grace) has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*” Jesus abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. Once again, **God** has done everything. Nothing has been done by us. This is God’s grace given to us.

A direct result of this gospel is that God give us His grace, mercy and peace. That’s why Paul greets Timothy in this way in v.2, “*To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

The greeting itself tells us a lot about the gospel:

Grace is God’s kindness to the undeserving,
Mercy is shown to the weak and helpless who can’t help themselves,
Peace is reconciliation, the restoration of harmony to lives spoiled by sin.

God’s gospel is the **most important treasure in the world** that we cling to. God’s gospel is to be faithfully guarded.

Question Number 2: **How do we guard this gospel?**

Guarding the gospel is not like putting gold bars in the bottom of a box and hiding it amongst other stuff, like my grandpa did. Guarding the gospel involves dynamic action. From this passage, this can be achieved in two ways.

First, *guard the gospel through the growth and strengthening of the Christian community.*

In a society where individualism is part of the dominant culture, we could automatically think guarding the gospel is an individual action: it’s up to one person to faithfully preach the gospel, and fiercely fight against any heresies, etc.

But from this passage as well as each individual fighting to guard the gospel it also takes a whole community of believers demonstrating their faith together to uphold the gospel. The Gospel is not deposited in an individual’s life alone. Rather, it is passed on through generations. Timothy’s faith first lived in his grandmother Lois then in his mother Eunice, then in him. Family, rather than each individual, is the foundational unit of the church. One of the significances of infant baptism is that parents make vows before the whole congregation that they will faithfully raise their child in God’s way. You’ve heard the saying “it takes a whole village to raise a child”. It’s the same for the church. I reckon it also takes the whole congregation to mature a child in Christ. This is how the gospel is passed on, preserved, and guarded.

Faith never grows alone. In order to guard the gospel, as Christians, we need to help each other grow. We need to pray for each other, and hold each other accountable. After our parents, it’s our friends who influence us the most, especially if they are also in some sense our teachers. Paul is Timothy’s best friend as well as his teacher, mentor and spiritual “father”. Paul prays for Timothy night and day. He takes him on his journeys and trains him. He writes to him from time to time with deepest affection. The relationship between Paul and Timothy is an excellent model of discipleship.

I always remember that my mentor Allan Webb, the former National Director of OMF, once taught me that we all need a “Paul” as well as a “Timothy” in our life. We hear so much talk today about the need for more pastors and for more missionaries, and this is important. But perhaps an even greater need is for more brothers, more sisters, more Timothys, more Pauls, more followers of Jesus who can get alongside others, and share with one another the things which they themselves have learned.

As a community of believers we're to strengthen our faith together, in order to pass on the gospel through generations and maintain its purity. Friends, today, I would like to pose a challenge to you, as you've read 2 Timothy 1, as a take-home application, you might want to ask yourself:

When was the last time your whole family gathered around the dinner table, read the Bible and prayed together?

When was the last time you met with a brother or sister to catch up, pray, and share some insights from your Bible reading?

If you can't answer these questions, or you find that you haven't had such experiences for a long while, I think today's passage is a great encouragement for you. It serves as a reminder to us all to faithfully guard the gospel through practical godly parenting and personal discipling.

Secondly, *guard the gospel by taking it into the ends of the earth.*

Guarding the gospel isn't a passive, defensive action. The best defensive strategy, in fact, is to attack and be offensive. Don't put the gospel in a box, let it out!

In order to take an offensive approach to guard the gospel, we need to take several steps to prepare ourselves.

Step one: don't be ashamed of the gospel. And don't be ashamed of being friends with other Christians.

Paul says in verse 8a, *“So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner.”* Paul himself is not ashamed of the gospel. He claims in Romans 1, *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”*

Let me mention my friend John, who taught some of us the seminar on how to tell the story of Jesus a few months back. We studied together at SMBC. Several times, I was with him having meals in Chinese restaurants. Since John can speak very good Chinese, one of his favourite things was to speak to Chinese people in Chinese which would stun them. He then would find any opportunities to share with them about Christ. Sitting next to him, sometimes I was embarrassed by his actions but he had no “shame” in doing that.

Don't be ashamed to testify about our Lord. All of us are Christ's witnesses. I'm sure you have had similar experiences where you tend not to let others know you are a Christian. It seems to make our life a bit easier, less embarrassing perhaps. I know I'm weak in this, but being a minister, every time people ask me what my job is, since I can't lie, I have no choice but to tell them that I work for the church. That answer will either be a conversation killer or a starting point to a conversation about faith and religion. After a while, I get used to people's reactions and find no shame in admitting I'm a Christian. My point here is that the temptation is strong, and common to man, to feel ashamed of Christ's name. That's why the Lord Jesus warns us in Mark, *“If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.”* (Mark 8:38)

Step two: Don't be ashamed of the gospel, but join other saints in suffering for the gospel.

Paul now encourages Timothy to move a step further - not to be ashamed, and take your share of suffering for the gospel. In v. 8b, *“but join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.”*

Suffer for the gospel!! It is a pretty radical statement, isn't it? Today, seeking a comfortable life is the normal thing to do. It's almost everyone's goal. Life is supposed to be comfortable. We all do what we can to avoid suffering at all costs.

I believe there are two types of suffering. One is involuntary suffering. The other type is voluntary suffering. People suffer from sickness - involuntary suffering. People suffer relationship breakdown, involuntary suffering. No one likes to suffer these kinds of suffering, but we can't avoid them. We also know that being a genuine Christian involves suffering. Sometimes we have no choice but to suffer. Being a Christian is anti-cultural and unpopular. Do you want to suffer? No! Do you have a choice? No! So, face it. This is the way it is for those who choose to follow Jesus.

However, there is also another type of suffering, - voluntary suffering. You could have a trouble-free life, but some choose not to live such a life. It would be too boring, so instead, you take some risks, living life full of unexpected

joy and surprises. A fulfilling life comes at a cost - that is: suffering. The Christian life, in some ways, is like the second choice. If we want to enjoy God and give Him glory, it's not possible to live a trouble-free life. Christianity is a joyful yet troublesome life. Jesus says, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”* See, here is your choice. You have a choice not to follow Jesus, not to carry the cross. But suffering, self-denial is the way we follow Jesus, in order to bring the gospel forward. Jesus tells us that you can't avoid suffering.

Recently at the Lausanne Conference, John Piper gave a talk on suffering from Ephesians 3, based on v.10, *“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Piper was saying that the church is given a job to demonstrate God's wisdom to the world and even to the devils and all supernatural spiritual enemies. What's God's wisdom? It's the work Jesus has accomplished on the cross. God's wisdom is the way He saves the world in and through Jesus' suffering. Now God gives this job to the church to demonstrate His wisdom but how is the church going to do this? Only through suffering, voluntarily suffering for the sake of the gospel, by self-denial, not suffering passively, but willingly, carrying our cross and following him.

You can try to live a trouble-free “Christian” life, but the gospel will not go any further. Rather, it will shrink and eventually diminish. We need to bring the gospel into our enemies' territory, to make Christ known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. And as we do this, we will suffer, but we will also be glorified. And more importantly, God will be glorified. What's your choice?

Step three: communicate the gospel with sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ

Not ashamed, willing to suffer, ... now you're ready to communicate the gospel. Paul was appointed as a herald, an apostle, and a teacher (v.11) to do such an important job. Today, we're also called by God to devote ourselves to the work of preaching and teaching the gospel.

In v.13, Paul tells Timothy that there is a pattern for communicating the gospel properly - *“sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus”*. The apostle's teaching is the model or standard for Timothy to follow. Paul is asking Timothy to use the apostle's teaching as his standard of sound words. He must do so “in the faith and love in Christ”. Paul has a deep concern about Timothy's personal theological convictions and his teaching. He saw that Timothy did have the character of faith and love. Paul was glad that he had found the one who would continue his mission. Timothy is the one who can keep the treasure, the good deposit, safe and sound.

Final Point: *God Himself guards the gospel*

Guard the gospel through the growth and strengthening of the church!
Guard the gospel by taking it into the ends of the world!

But we are still fallible sinful beings. On our own we can't guarantee the absolute purity of the gospel. However, what comforts us is that God Himself is the guarantor of the gospel. Ultimately, it is his responsibility to preserve His own good news.

All we do is to be part of God's mission guided by the Holy Spirit. In v. 7, *“For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.”* Through the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart, Timothy was equipped to guard the gospel. And so are we. God has given us a spirit not of “timidity” but of “power and love and self-control, so we can be confident in guarding the gospel. Therefore, *“guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.”* (v.14b) God will never allow the light of the gospel to be extinguished.

It's our privilege that God uses us, frail and fallible creatures, to carry this important job. He has entrusted the precious treasure into our hands, but He hasn't taken His own hand off it. He Himself is the final guardian. God will preserve the truth which He has committed to the church. **What a comfort!**