

1 Timothy 1:12-20

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 September 2023

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Turn again, if you will, to 1 Timothy 12. So next Sunday night, Sinclair Ferguson is speaking. He's in town for the Ligonier Conference and he's going to preach for us next Sunday.

Then the week after, God willing, is at Ruben's installation service if he passes his exams on Friday. And David Field will be preaching at that. So this is a one-off.

If you're in court and you're in law, there's Exhibit A. Exhibit A is the chief piece of evidence that's brought by the prosecution to support their case.

And I think in 1 Timothy, what you've got really is a prosecution. Paul has got a case against the church in Ephesus. He's bringing a charge against the church in Ephesus.

And he's charging them with departing from the gospel. They're in danger of allowing the gospel to slip through their fingers. And it's a very, very serious situation to be in.

[1 : 00] He's accusing them of departing from this glorious gospel of the blessed God of Israel. It's a very serious situation to be in. And he now presents himself as Exhibit A.

And what he does is Paul gives his own testimony. And he's doing that in support of the case that is against the church in Ephesus. And against the rogue elders. So if you remember Acts 20, when Paul is leaving Ephesus, he says, From amongst your own number, there will be people that come up and they lead the church off the rails.

It's not going to come from outside. It's from people who say that they're within the church. And 1 Timothy is really about how do you keep the church on the rails? When is a church no longer a church?

And the answer to that question is when it's lost the gospel. There are lots of churches, aren't they, that call themselves churches. But they're no longer churches any longer.

The gospel has been removed. How do we prevent that from happening here? You can go to any part of the UK. You can go to West Ealing.

[2 : 13] And you'll find loads of places that were churches, were proclaiming the gospel. But now they're not. Some of the Hindu temples. In our country you can find churches that are there in name, aren't they?

But their churches that Jesus Christ would no longer recognize. Churches go off the rails, doesn't it? If you saw the article in the Times this week about the survey amongst the Church of England clergy, it was alarming, infuriating, anger-inducing.

And Paul writes this letter to Timothy to know how do we keep a church on track? And he puts himself into the argument. He presents himself as living proof of what the gospel is and what the gospel does.

He is exhibit A. Now I want you to see three things. I want you to see echoes from the past, an exhibit for the future, and an exhortation for the present. So echoes from the past. You've been in those places.

You can go in Hanwell County, the viaduct there. As you go through it, it echoes, doesn't it, children? Your voice echoes. You've been in those places. There's not many around Hanwell. But you shout and your voice bounces off the wall.

[3 : 26] Sometimes, depending on the acoustics, if you're in the right place, in the right tunnel, that echo can go on for a very, very long time. In Paul's case, the echo has gone on for 20 to 30 years.

By the time he writes this letter to Timothy, Paul has been a Christian for 25 years. And you can still hear the echoes of what people used to say about it. It's there in verse 13.

What kind of man was he? A blasphemer, a violent, a persecutor. If you go back to Acts chapter 9, to the day of his conversion, Ananias is asked, Will you go and sponsor Paul?

Will you go and be with Paul? And Ananias says this, Lord, I've heard from many about this man, how much evil he's done to the saints in Jerusalem. And here he's got authority from the chief priest to buy and do call on his name.

And then later on in Acts 26, Acts 9, he says this, And when he'd come to Jerusalem, Paul attempted to join the disciples. He tried to join the church, but do you know what the church did? [4 : 29] They were afraid of him. For they did not believe that he was a disciple. Or if you go to Galatians 1, Paul says that, And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea.

They didn't know who I was. They were only hearing it, He used to persecute us. He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.

And they glorified God because of me. But not everybody did. And Paul, all his life, And in fact, all his ministry was the subject of a whispering campaign.

That's very hard to cope with. If Paul had walked into a recruitment agency in Jerusalem and said, I want to work for the church, they would have said, We don't think you've got the right CV.

Your CV is blasphemous, persecutor, violent man. No, no, they are not the qualifications that we're looking for. And that was what was being said about him.

[5 : 31] He's been a Christian 20 to 30 years, But people were still dredging up the past. And whispering about him. I don't know about you, I don't know whether you've been the subject of a whispering campaign.

In one sense, every Christian is. Every Christian will find himself or herself in that situation.

Because, for one thing, the Bible says that the devil, He's described as the accuser of Christians.

What does the devil do? He loves, doesn't he, to dredge up your past And to point the finger at us. I love this quote. When the devil reminds you of his past, Make sure you remind him of his future.

But the devil is always wanting, isn't he, To remind us of our past. He doesn't appear in kind of cloven hooves, Or, you know, horns, or a forked tail.

He usually comes in disguise. Sometimes the devil appears as an angel of light. Sometimes he appears in the pulpit. Through false teachers. Sometimes the devil comes to us through our nearest and our dearest.

[6 : 38] Through our closest friends. And often they don't realize what they're doing. But a careless word, a casual comment. What can it do? It can have a devastating effect, can't it? It's happened to me again and again.

And I'm sure it's happened to you. It's not that people mean anything. But sometimes you get two or three people saying something to you. One after the other. And it can be paralyzing, can't it? It happens to all of us as believers.

And the devil will come in very subtle ways. Where we least expect to find him. And he points his finger and he accuses. Now how do you handle this? How did Paul handle this whispering campaign?

How did Paul handle these echoes from his past? Notice what he does. Notice what he doesn't do. He doesn't try to justify himself. He doesn't become self-defensive.

Look what he does in verse 12. I thank God who's given me strength in Christ Jesus. Do you remember what the hymn says, isn't it?

[7 : 37] When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within, what do I do? I upward I look. And see him there who made an end of all my sin. You see, the devil can never tell you anything about yourself that Jesus doesn't already know.

Just remember that. When the devil dredges up something from your subconscious. When he brings up something from your long and distant past. When the devil comes and has a go at you. He's not telling you anything about yourself that Jesus doesn't know already. And it's all atoned for. It is all covered by the blood of his cross.

His love that brought him to the cross covers the multitude of our sins. Past and present and future. Now you realise that, don't you? The sins of my past are forgiven.

But what about tomorrow? Well, all your sins in the future were covered over when Jesus died. You didn't even exist when Jesus died on the cross.

[8 : 48] But he died there to atone for your sins. For all your sins, past and present and future. It is all covered by his atoning sacrifice on the cross. And that is where our protection comes.

When the devil has a go at us. When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within. I don't get all prickly and self-defensive. I don't have to justify myself.

Upward I look and I see him there. Who made an end of all my sin. And you notice how the devil always oversteps himself. I love the way Paul talks in verse 12. He, particularly, he reminds us of our past, doesn't he, the devil?

Because he wants to paralyze us in the present. That's the difference between the devil and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin.

But when the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin, he always points us to Jesus at the same time. The Holy Spirit never shows you your sin to demoralize you or to discourage you.

[9 : 50] The Holy Spirit always shows us our sin and points us to the Savior at the same time. The devil will show you your sin. But he'll turn you in on yourself and he will demoralize you and discourage you.

He always oversteps his mark. Can you see the opposite effect for Paul than discouraging him? It greatly encourages him.

The devil comes and says to Paul, You are a blasphemer. You're a persecutor. You're a violent man. How dare you call yourself a Christian? And Paul says, Thank God.

Thank you, Satan, for reminding me how much I owe to Jesus Christ. Look at verse 12 and 13. I thank him who's given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful.

And he appointed me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, an insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I acted ignorantly and in unbelief.

[10 : 58] And the grace of our Lord Jesus overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. He's filled with gratitude, isn't he, for what Jesus has done for him. That not only has Jesus saved me, but Paul says he's made me one of his servants.

And he's trusted me of all people. Me who used to persecute the church, who used to persecute the gospel, so that I can share it with others. The persecutor has become the preacher.

The murderer, and he was a murderer, has become a missionary. And only the grace of God can do that. How good God is. He does far more than we deserve.

And how good it is to be reminded of that, even by our worst enemy, the devil. He's doing us a favour when he dredges up your past. What a great thing it is to know that you are saved by grace alone.

And so I have become so blasé about things so often. I just take it for granted. I don't appreciate it as much as I should how gracious God has been in Christ to me.

[12 : 10] John Bunyan, in his famous work, Pilgrim's Progress, which is, despite what some people have said, it is a magnificent work. It's so, so helpful. In the Pilgrim's Progress, Great Heart says to Christian's boys, forgetful green is the most dangerous of places.

Forgetful green is the most dangerous of places. It's one of the purposes of the Lord's Supper, isn't it?

Don't allow yourself to forget. The great debt of gratitude that you owe to your saviour. And that's what John is preaching to us, isn't it? John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace, on his epitaph, he made sure.

He said, this is what it writes. You can go and see it in the city of London. John Newton, Clark, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the mercy of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, and pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had so long laboured to destroy.

It's a great way to be remembered, isn't it? In fact, that famous statement is that when John Newton had lost his memory, I think he probably suffered from Alzheimer's, there's at least evidence that points to that.

[13 : 27] He said, right at the end of his life, my memory is gone, but two things I remember. I'm a great sinner, and Jesus Christ is a great saviour. Thomas Goodwin, the old Puritan, wrote this letter to his son.

He said, when I was threatening to become cold in my ministry, he was a preacher preparing to preach, but you can translate that into your own devotional life, if you like. When I was threatening to become cold, and I felt Sabbath morning coming, and my heart not being filled with amazement at the grace of God, or when I was making ready to dispense the Lord's Supper, do you know what I used to do?

I used to take a turn up and down the sins of my past life, and I always came down again with a broken and contrite heart ready to preach. I don't think I ever went up to the pulpit, that I didn't stop

for a moment at the foot of it, and take a turn among the sins of my past year.

I don't think I ever planned a sermon, that I didn't take a turn around my study table, and look back at the sins of my youth, and of all my life down to the present, and many a Sabbath morning, when soul has been cold and dry for the lack of prayer during the week, a turn up and down in my past life, before I went into the pulpit, always broke my hard heart, and made me close with the gospel for my own soul, before I began to preach.

See what's happening? Don't think that you can ever grow out of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, or go beyond the gospel.

[15:13] You always need to come back to hear, to the foot of the cross. As Paul hears the things that are being said about him, this whispering campaign, as he hears those echoes from the past, it doesn't discourage him, it doesn't depress him, or defeat him.

On the contrary, he's filled with a fresh appreciation of the grace of God. And then he presents himself, this second point, he presents himself as an exhibit of the future. Look at verses 15 to 16. The saying is trustworthy, and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I'm the foremost, but I receive mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who would believe in him for eternal life.

That isn't false modesty, that isn't pious, super spiritual talk, he was the worst. Paul has literally slaughtered men and women and children, he thought he was doing God's will, he was very much like those people that flew into the Twin Towers.

They thought they were doing God's will. He was a violent man, he was a persecutor of Christians, he was a murderer and a blasphemer. So he's not being sort of super pious, ever so humble.

[16:38] He wants you to understand, he's presenting himself as a demonstration of what the gospel can do. That's the whole point of his testimony. It's not hard to understand why you would want to do that.

It seems, doesn't it, from verses 9 and 10, that these people in Ephesus were losing their confidence in the gospel. It's not surprising. When you look at what Ephesus is like, any modern city is like this, isn't it?

Look at verse 9. There are lawless and disobedient, ungodly sinners, unholy and profane, those who strike their fathers and mothers for murderers, sexually immoral men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.

That's Ephesus, that's Ealing, that's London. People often say, don't they, London is such a hard place for the gospel. The UK is such a hard place for the gospel.

Well, everywhere is hard. Doesn't get any harder than Paul's heart. What was happening in Ephesus is, they persuaded themselves that Ephesus was such a hard place, no one's going to get converted in Ephesus, that they turned in on themselves.

[17:59] They'd beaten a retreat, they'd pulled up the drawbridge, and so instead of evangelizing Ephesus, they're proselytizing themselves.

They're trying to win Christians over this genealogy, or this myth of the Old Testament, this story, this meaning of the Old Testament. They turned in on themselves. It's always a terrible thing.

When Christians are more concerned to win over other Christians to their point of view than they are with winning the lost. And when that happens, that becomes a symptom of terminal decline in a church or denomination.

Instead of going to Ephesus and telling the people who needed to hear this message, they'd withdrawn, and they're trying to proselytize one another. And so you and I, in this church, we have the very message that Ealing, Greenfoot, Hanwell, Shepherd's Bush needs to hear.

But will they hear it? Isn't the danger that the people who need it never hear it? They're out of use. So one encouragement, Paul's testimony is for us to be bold.

[19:21] To go to the people where it's so hard, where people are so resistant and so rebellious and so disinterested. We say, well, you can't reach people on that. And Paul says to you tonight, God's grace touched me and I was like that.

The member in your family who you think they'll never become Christians, I just can't even bring it up with them. Paul says, well, if God can save me, the chief of sinners, then there are no hopeless cases.

No hopeless cases. There's no one he can't reach. Are you persuaded of that? Spurgeon has got some great quotes on this verses.

He says this, he says, if a bridge is strong enough to carry an elephant, it will certainly carry a mouse. And if the greatest sinner who's ever lived has entered heaven by the bridge of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, then no one who has ever lived may say, my sin is beyond forgiveness. It's a great encouragement for a church that might be losing its nerve. It's a great encouragement to get out where people are.

[20 : 37] It's a challenge to us, isn't it? It's a great thing to do with you. It's a great thing to do with you. It's a great thing to do with you. It's a really, really good thing. The big danger with that is that we just get comfortable.

We've got to reach healing, the impossible people. The people who look like they show no interest in Christianity, and we can do it because that's what we're here for.

Not only had the church in Ephesus lost its nerve because it was such a hard place, there was something else going on. Look at verses 19 and 20. It wasn't just the situation they found themselves in. Holding faith and good conscience by rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I've handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

It is always a kick in the guts when that happens. There's two men, Hymenaeus and Alexander, gospel men.

They'd be men of the faith, but now they've been handed over to Satan. What does that mean? It's very, very simple. They've been kicked out of the church. That's what it means.

[21 : 54] You're either in the church or in the world and Satan is the prince of this world. That's what the Bible says. And so tonight, if you're not in Christ's kingdom, then you're in his kingdom.

There are teachers, false teachers, who are preaching a false gospel. I am sick and tired of reading about scandals in the church.

I'm fed up of reading the blasphemy that one of the bishops might write, denying God's word. Hymenaeus and Alexander, they were gospel men once.

They were men of faith and love, and yet Paul says, I've handed them over to Satan. They are no longer Christian men. We have to say, don't we, that there are people that call and say, Christian leaders, they do not speak for us.

They no longer hold to the faith with a good conscience. And when that happens, it is devastating. It affects our credibility. And what Paul is saying is when that happens, when you have your deflections, when you have people that acutely embarrass you in public because they've made shipwreck of their faith and departed from the gospel, don't forget the reverse is true as well.

[23 : 27] It never gets reported in the newspapers, does it? But the reverse is always true. Blasphemers and persecutors and violent men can become Christians and do become Christians. And the gospel can transform the greatest blasphemer into a man or woman of faith and love.

And Paul says, I'm living proof of that. I was once a blasphemer, as everyone knows, verse 17, but now I'm a worshipper of God.

I've been changed, glorious, so to the king of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen. So don't lose your confidence in the gospel. That brings me finally to an exhortation for now.

Look at verses 18 and 19. This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience.

What is the fight the fight, is the battle for the faith for the gospel? Tertullian, one of the early church leaders, said this, just as Jesus Christ was crucified between two thieves, so there are two thieves who will always come and try and rob us of the gospel.

[24 : 54] There's legalism on the one hand and license on the other. And the battle for you and I is always to keep the balance between those two things.

That we don't fall into legalism on the one side or license on the other. We understand the grace of God which keeps us and every generation of Christians has got to fight this battle.

Because when you lose that balance, you make shipwreck of your faith. And we don't have any choice in that matter because there's a chain of command, isn't there, from Paul to Timothy to us and the charge is keep the faith, guard the gospel.

How do you do that? Holding to it by faith and a good conscience and by passing it on to others. You don't preserve the gospel by wrapping it up in mothballs.

So the church becomes like a museum. The gospel is brought out at 11 and 6 on Sundays and anyone who wants to come can come along.

[26 : 12] There's a sign put up saying lost sheep are welcome here. And then we shut it up and we put it in the box. You don't preserve the gospel even by enshrining it in the Westminster Confession of Faith, our doctrinal standards.

I believe and love the Westminster Confession. It's an expression of what I believe. But that's not how you preserve the gospel. How do you do that? You preserve the gospel by proclaiming it to others.

What Paul is arguing here let me finish with this quote. It's a well-known quote about a surf club. It's a true story.

My voice is going isn't it? It sounds like I'm emotional but I'm not. The surf club was founded in the first half of the 20th century. The beach was notorious for currents and when a local boy disappeared in a swimming accident one day the local people got together and decided to form a surf club to patrol the beach on weekends and to rescue people from the sea.

the surf club became very successful. Everyone saw the need numbers grew. They built a clubhouse. The club took on a social life. There were dances on a Saturday night.

[27 : 23] Eventually a bigger clubhouse was needed. To fund it they rang charity fairs, sausage sizzles, bingo on a Wednesday night. In a short amount of time the new clubhouse was built.

It was a magnificent building. People loved it. They marveled at it. But a funny thing happened. While there was no shortage of helpers for the bingo and the beer and prawns night and the dances were growing in popularity they began to struggle to fill the rosters for the beach patrol.

Lots of people wanted to be part of the club but not the rescuing part. In fact eventually they cancelled the beach patrol for lack of interest even though the social life of the club was booming.

They realised the problem when a man drowned on the now unpatrolled beach next summer.

They'd forgotten who they were. They'd forgotten that they were there to see people saved and to train up more lifesavers and to support the beach patrol.

And I wonder if that could ever happen here in this church. Do you think that can happen in a church? Of course it can. And that we can forget who we are and why we're here.

[28 : 39] We really enjoy coming. We make friends. We have a great time. But when there are rosters for beach patrol to proclaim the gospel we struggle.

And we have prayer meetings to pray for the men and women. Well it's been such an encouragement hasn't it to have so many come and pray. a whole point of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus are to remind us who we are and what we're here for.

To remind us of God's great mission statement. Chapter 2 verses 3 and 4 this is good and pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour who desires all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

That's God's mission statement. And I hope it's ours. And that's why Paul is writing this letter. Let's pray.