

May It Not Be Charged Against Them!

Proper 25

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2 Tim.4:6-8;16-18

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The other day I heard some people discussing why they did not want to have a funeral. They were not happy with their friends and family who hadn't come to see them recently. One of them said something along the lines of "If they don't come to see me when I'm here, they don't get to see me when I'm gone."

These people were discussing the end of their lives. How often do you consider preparations for your funeral? What do you want your friends and family to know—either about you, or about your faith, or both? Do the hymns you are picking give that message? Does the text you pick? Or maybe you want your confirmation verse to be your text. Granted, your pastor, whether me or someone else, can pick a text, but then it is not what you chose to say. That's not to say a pastor can't pick a good text to preach the message from, but again, it is not as personal as if you chose the text yourself.

Considering the people I overheard again, I'm not sure if they are believers or not. First, I wasn't sure if they were believers to begin with; and then again because of how they were discussing their funeral arrangements, or, in this case, lack thereof.

What do you think Jesus' disciples did in preparing for their deaths? Most of the apostles were executed, but, what about Jesus' other disciples? Do you think that they held grudges against their friends and family so that they could not attend a funeral service? Or do you think they, like Christ, wanted it known that they held nothing against anyone when they died? Remember Jesus' last words as He was hanging on the cross? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Or think about the martyr Stephen. What were his last words? "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." If you look closely at Acts, it says Stephen "called out"—he didn't just speak these words. And what was happening when he called them out? He was being stoned to death as he called them out. And at the same time, there sat Saul—the same man who would later be called Paul, and who would also later write similar words to his younger brother in the faith Timothy in his last letter to him.

Think about your faith and your funeral arrangements as we look at our text from that letter written to Timothy from Paul.

Verse 1

As we look at our text, it's good to remember that we just heard from the beginning of this letter a couple weeks ago. Paul was in chains, having been arrested for the faith, and he was encouraging Timothy to keep his faith no matter what trials or suffering may come. Paul continues this mentoring as he writes: "I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."

With these words, it is easy to see that Paul is preparing for his death. He considers his life completed, his fight fought, his race finished, and, most importantly, he has kept the faith. How many of you are as concerned that you don't lose the faith while you are alive? None of us knows how long we have on this planet. Granted, Jesus could return this afternoon and we could all, hopefully, be found in faith and taken with Him today. But what if Jesus doesn't return today, or tomorrow? What if He doesn't return for five years, or ten?

Are you holding on to your faith tight enough for five or ten more years of fighting the fight of faith or running the race of faith?

What does it look like to hold onto the faith? Does it look like going off and doing whatever sin you please thinking God will forgive you anyway? Most certainly not. Paul wrote in his letter to the Roman believers “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” But maybe you think that’s just Paul. Well, what about Jesus’ other disciples and apostles: do you think that they went about committing sins on purpose? Where is it written that the disciples, after being called by Christ, had sex with whomever they wanted, or that they stole, or that they rebelled against their authorities for reasons besides making laws against the faith? Do the Scriptures not rather depict them as joyfully traveling from town to town proclaiming Christ crucified and risen, breaking bread with one another, both in meal and the Sacrament, and in joy of being counted worthy for suffering for the faith?

To put things in the proper context, suffering is never good in and of itself, but, do we not believe that God can—and does—bring good from it? The Scriptures show that God does. But we’re not just looking at our lives, but especially to the end of our lives. Let’s continue with the next verses.

Verse 2

“At my first defense,” Paul wrote, “no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them!”

Let’s stop and consider those few words. Paul is writing to Timothy about some of the last court cases regarding his service in the Lord; and he writes that no one came to testify on his behalf. Apparently there must have been those Paul could think of who *could have* come and testified for him, but they didn’t.

Have you ever been in a situation where you were put on trial or on the spot to speak about your actions and had friends around who could have backed you up, but who didn’t? Then you know what Paul went through. Yet how many of you are now willing to say that you forgive those friends who didn’t back you up, or that it not be held against them?

We are in the discipleship of forgiving. You and I have been called into it by the Word of God, which proclaims Jesus Christ crucified and risen. Two thousand years ago, the man-God Jesus lived among us, preaching and teaching, but He was sent to the cross by an unfair trial. His disciples deserted Him and the testimony presented against Him did not agree. Nevertheless, Jesus was handed over to be crucified. He went to His own death saying nothing, knowing that His crucifixion was the only way to save sinners.

Is that account just another story to you? Is it just a piece of history that has no effect on your life? No! You have been called by the Gospel and enlightened with the gifts of God so that you might believe in Jesus as your personal Savior *today!* Today, and to the end of your life.

Don’t give up the fight! Don’t quit running! There is laid up for you a crown of righteousness. It will be given to you on account of the One you have believed, Jesus the Son of God, and your Savior from sin. Jesus has asked His Father not to hold your sins against you from the very cross on which He died to take away your sins. God answered by raising Him from the dead. This is My Son, with whom I am well pleased: it will be done as He has asked. Your sins have been forgiven—all of them.

Verse 3

What more do you and I need? We have been given forgiveness; we've received God's Holy Spirit to keep us in the true faith—what does it matter what others have done to you compared to the eternal life you have waiting for you? And if you still have a grudge, trust in Jesus. That's what Paul did. He wrote to Timothy: "the Lord stood by me and strengthened me." Jesus stood by him at his trial where he was bound in chains and was still standing with him as he wrote his last letter to Timothy—of that, Paul had no doubt. And Paul knew that Jesus would not abandon him, either. The final words we have from Paul, besides his usual greetings, were: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen."

That's what Paul believed when he wrote his last letter. What do you believe? How long do you have left on earth? Will Jesus come today, or in five years, or ten, or a few thousand more? Keep the faith. Trust God's promises in Christ Jesus that He will be there to strengthen you and keep you from every evil deed.

These promises do not rely on your success, or your failures, no matter how many. They rely on whether God accepted Jesus' sacrifice; and God raised Him from the dead. If Jesus has eternal life and has promised the same to you, what can man do to you? What can they take? House, land, life? Do you not have eternal life coming? In Christ Jesus, you do. That is why we can say right along with Paul, God is with me to strengthen me and keep me from every evil deed. He is beside me because Jesus has taken my sin away, so "To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen."