

Do you know the difference between a friend and a true friend? There's a difference I think. Alison and I have some true friends that have shared the journey with us and vice versa for 25 years. It's impossible to predict what's round the corner in each of our lives, but we know we are there for each other. We know our relationship is that close, that we need each other. We know that we can say things to each other honestly, as they come from a place of love.

In AD 62 Paul has been under house arrest in Rome and it's considered that after this experience he writes his first letter to his true friend, Timothy. Timothy is described in Romans 16 as Paul's fellow worker. Paul regularly longs for Timothy to be nearby for support. He actually says in his letter to the Philippians (2:20) that there is no one else like Timothy. He is a real friend and a true companion in the Gospel. And so now in AD 66, Paul is again in prison. But the circumstances are now very different from his first Roman imprisonment. Things are a lot tougher. He feels abandoned by almost everyone. He longs for his companion Timothy to be there at the end of his life. And so this letter to Timothy is likely to be his last. But he knows that the task of encouraging the church must carry on, and so this letter is a 'passing on the baton' of ministry to close friend now. Paul has finished his turn of carrying the baton of the gospel of Christ. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith", he will say in chapter 4 of this letter. And so knowing that his time is limited, Paul gets straight to the point and outlines his instructions in four concise statements – these we are going to examine briefly this morning.

First, he reminds us that in life we are to have a thankful heart.

He says, "I am grateful to God whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day". Paul is thankful, Paul has a clear conscience and Paul is prayerful. Folks, what a way to end a life and what a motivation and example for Timothy and for us! Many years ago I remember being with an elderly parishioner, who was extremely honest with me. This was a man who had no relatives, no children to pass a heritage on to. He told me that he didn't understand why he was still alive. He said that he had nothing to live for, and that actually when he would die no one would miss him, no one would notice he had gone, and there was nothing after death to look forward to. I find that very sad, that this man felt he had nothing to pass on. But for me he was a man like others that need so much love and encouragement. I prayed for him at that time, that he would have a fresh revelation of how much God loved him, and there was so much to be thankful for. For Paul, he was thankful to God, even though he suffered greatly, and he was very aware of the heritage that had shaped him in his life, and he wanted to ensure this heritage was passed on through Timothy. We all have been encouraged by those people who have shaped our faith over the years, haven't we. Whether it was a parent or a good friend, we owe them a debt of gratitude, and be thankful.

Second, Paul reminds us to stir up the gift of God that is in us.

He says to rekindle the gift of God that is within you. The amazing thing about the gifts of God are that they are given to each believer completely irrespective of their own merit or qualification. Because in Christ we are all equal. No one is more gifted than the other. We may think Billy Graham was more gifted than us. No. He was just open to how God would maximise the gift given to him. It's also worth acknowledging that Paul isn't saying to now **start** using the gifts God has given us. He says to **rekindle**, or to stir up. There's a difference. Maybe the gift has been lying dormant

and needs awakened. In our home in Garvagh when we built it we put in a wood-burning stove in. It's amazing that when all the embers were apparently died away, if I opened the air flow it could bring alive the little smoulders that you would think were dead. Similarly I think at times in our lives, we can allow the gifts that God has given us to die away. But Paul is saying here to rekindle these gifts, to bring them back to life. How do we do this in Church life? Well I think through encouragement and support; to let people know that their gift is so appreciated, and that as leaders we will walk alongside people to support and give them permission as they are used in God's Church.

Thirdly, Paul says we're not to be ashamed of the testimony about God

"Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God". We might say to ourselves that we are never ashamed of our faith, but we all at different times have not stood up for our faith, when we know it might be an unpopular opinion. Paul as he wrote to the Philippians (Ch 2) reminds his readers that when we stand for Jesus in a crooked and twisted generation, we are shining as lights, holding fast to the word of life, so that others who now sit in darkness might see the Light of the World. Paul also says in verse _____ that he is not ashamed because he properly knows the one who he puts his trust in. That word 'know' translates as being absolutely convinced and void of all doubt. Paul is essentially saying, "While some may laugh, mock, ridicule, deny or even doubt the power and reality of the Gospel, I "know" without a shadow of doubt that the One I preach and die for is real. He's here. He's alive. I've seen Him. I've heard Him. And I'm on my way to meet Him. And my faith in Him is simply unshakable!"

And so if we are truly in Christ, we should never be ashamed in what we believe, even against the opposition that is much more vocal in today's society.

Finally, Paul is saying that we should align ourselves to the truth of God's Word.

He says, "Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that is in Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you". Throughout history God requires us to hold fast to the truth as it has been given in the Word of God. We are to hold it, guard it and proclaim it! When we start to water down the truth of God's Word, we end up creating doubt on every major doctrine. When we redefine, then we are moving away from Jesus and focusing on our own wishes. As a Church we stay true to God's word by collectively studying it, both in our daily devotions, but also corporately through house groups and preaching.

I wonder as you think of your own situation, do you have a Timothy who you desire to shape and pass the baton of faith on to. You might even at times wonder what else you can offer to God at this stage in your faith. Well, my challenge for us all today is to find your Timothy. He or she may be in your family, they may be in this Church. If you want to find someone to pass your spiritual heritage on to, but don't know who, then invite me to your home and we can chat about teaming you up with many younger folk who would respect your wisdom and value your prayers for them. As we consider this, may we be witnesses to a new generation of believers, praying that will walk with a thankful heart, to rekindle their gifts, to never be ashamed of the Gospel, and finally to stay firm to God's Word. Amen.