



# Auburn Presbyterian Church

*Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual*

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## “Gratitude”

### 1 Timothy 1—first in series on “First Timothy”

One of the things I most appreciated about my father was his sense of gratitude. When he was starting out in business, he was taking some serious risks to get his company going. He sold orders for lumber, but didn't own a stick of it; with the order, he'd hustle to get the lumber to serve is customer. He was good enough at this that his company grew and grew, and he could keep a good-sized inventory on hand, to fulfill big orders, even custom sizes of lumber. But throughout his business live, he remained grateful for those first buyers who took a chance on him. They didn't have to give him those early orders; he was always mystified that those orders had come his way. He had an attitude of gratitude, whenever you asked him about his success.

A woman was at work when she received a phone call that her daughter was very sick with a fever. She left her work and stopped by the pharmacy to get some medication for her daughter. When returning to her car she found that she had locked her keys in the car. She was in a hurry to get home to her sick daughter, she didn't know what to do so she called home and told the baby sitter what had happened and she didn't know what to do. The baby sitter told her that her daughter was getting worse. She said you might find a coat hanger and use that to open the door. The woman looked around and found an old rusty coat hanger that had been thrown down on the ground, possibly by someone else who had locked their keys in the car. Then she looked at the hanger and said, "I don't know how to use this." So she bowed her head and asked God for help. Within five minutes an old rusty car pulled up with a dirty, greasy, bearded man who was wearing an old biker skull rag on his head. The woman thought, "Oh God, great God. This is what you sent to help me?" But, she was desperate, so she was thankful, though nervous. The man got out of his car and asked the woman if he could help her. She said "Yes, my daughter is very sick. I stopped to get her some medication, and I locked my keys in the car. I must get home to her. Please, can you use this hanger to unlock my car?" The man took the hanger from the woman, walked over to the car, and in less than a minute he had the car open. The woman hugged the man, and through her tears she said, "Thank you so much. You are a very nice man!" The man responded, "Lady, I am not a nice man; I've just spent the last few years in prison for car theft. In fact, I was just released from prison this morning." The woman hugged the man again and with tears of gratitude cried out loud, "Thank you God, for sending me a professional!"

The picture today for this sermon speaks volumes about gratitude, doesn't it? Here's an old veteran, expressing his gratitude to this younger serviceman for his obvious sacrifice. What a picture of gratitude!

Gratitude is our subject today, as we begin a new series of sermons based on Paul's First Letter to Timothy. There are so many issues this short letter puts before us, so we have to be selective, even within a single chapter, as today. Let's pick up God's Word in the first



chapter of First Timothy, one of those little books toward the back of your Bible. “Revelation” is the last one. Moving toward the front, there comes the “James, Peter, John” group; before that is Hebrews, and then comes “Little Philemon and the “T’s”—Titus, the Timothys, and the Thessalonians. First Timothy is where you want to go, chapter one. Listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[Text]*

As best we can tell, Paul’s young apprentice, Timothy, has been ministering in Ephesus after Paul had started the church there. Paul had moved on, perhaps all the way to Rome by this time, but must have received a report (perhaps a letter from Timothy, himself) about difficulties Tim was facing with the Ephesian Christians, and so Paul wrote this letter to buck up the young man.

Paul of Tarsus, of course, was Christ’s major missionary (or, apostle) to the whole civilized world. Most of the writings in what we call our New Testament come from Paul. After his conversion by Christ’s direct confrontation while he was traveling from town to town to arrest Christians—he refers to this briefly in verses 12-17--and after his seasoning and living as a disciple of Jesus, Paul began to travel across the Roman empire to introduce people to God’s message of salvation that is available in no one else, but Jesus.

In most places Paul stops, he begins by meeting Jews in town, and then speaking as a guest in their synagogue. (Remember, Paul is a Jew—a “completed Jew” who has found God’s Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth. He knows the Jewish Scriptures and culture very, very well, and is a brilliant theologian.) Paul usually convinces some Jews that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Messiah, and these Jews become followers of The Way, as the earliest Christians were called. But others in that synagogue would almost always come to see Paul as a threat: teaching heresy, lying about God and God’s plan. So they usually drove him out, and then Paul would seek lodging among the new converts, and begin to work among Gentiles (that is, non-Jews) in the town.

Timothy was one such Gentile convert, the son of a believing mother and grandmother; they must have been converted before young Timothy. But Tim is especially eager to learn more of Jesus, of the Holy Spirit, of the Gospel. He wants to give his life to bringing this good news of God and a new relationship with God to as many people as he can. Paul sees great potential in this youth, and spends a chunk of time with Tim, who accompanies Paul on some of his mission trips. Timothy becomes Paul’s apprentice in ministry--s disciple of Paul, as Paul is a disciple of Jesus. A “father/son” relationship grows up between these guys, and Paul comes to trust Tim so much that he leaves him in charge of the church in Ephesus, despite his youth.

But not all goes well in that ministry, in perhaps Tim’s first “solo assignment”. What could be the problem in Ephesus?

Well, what do you know about Ephesus? It’s a big, prosperous city, the location of an elaborate pagan temple built to honor the goddess Artemis, the goddess of fertility. After a fire the temple was rebuilt in about 350 B.C., and was named one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. That brought tourists as well as religious devotees from all over the world to this city, spawning a tourist industry, including shops and small factories that turned out little silver shrines in a similar shape to the large imposing Temple—you know, something to take home to the wife and kids, since they hadn’t invented T-shirts yet. . . . In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, archaeologists have unearthed a 24,000-seat public theater, so this was a city used to big things, and a lot of variety.

This “tourist” mentality and attitudes became part of the cultural assumptions in Ephesus. What I mean is, everything became commercial, including one’s religious life. Greece was the world’s first democracy, remember, and even under Roman rule, the individual citizen had a dignity and identity that other cultures did not enjoy. The Ephesians who became followers of Jesus brought this same worldview with them when they became Christians. For many of them, Christianity became a nice add-on to their beliefs, like you find in many Hindus today; Jesus is just one more god. The Old Testament Torah (first five books of what we call the Old Testament—that was the Bible Paul and the early Christians had), the Torah and its stories with those loooooong genealogies actually became quite popular among these new converts. Some of these Ephesian Christians seemed to enjoy endlessly speculating on where they fit in the spiritual genealogy of Abraham, let’s say. Or they turned the Bible stories into myths that included pagan characters, too. They did not yet understand that God is one, there are no other gods before Him, that only in Christ can people connect with God, and that God calls people to pursue lives that please Him, not just to believe in Him.

It didn’t help that the Christian faith still was developing. The core gospel was clear—you heard that in Paul’s line, “Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.” But much of what has by now become settled truth was still up in the air then. That gave LOTS of room for invention and speculation, for there was no authority against which to compare any ideas under the sun about Jesus.

And think of Timothy. Perhaps this is his first ministry assignment. I know when I have talked with young pastors, they often look back on their first assignments with a mixture of thanksgiving and regret. If they went through Seminary right out of college, as Sharon and I did, their youth and inexperience did not usually help them “in the real world.” Many young pastors do get highly anxious when pressures of the pastorate begin to build; in fact, the departure of young pastors in several denominations has been a big problem in recent years, and measures are being taken to specifically minister to these young ministers, so they grow instead of flee. Being a young pastor is hard.

And Timothy is trying to do the right thing as pastor among people older in Christ than he is, and mostly older in years, in a culture that treasured age and wisdom and experience far more than we do in this culture. That’s a tough spot. How is he to lead these people? How is he to correct error, especially if there’s not a clear standard yet among Christians? Timothy needs help, and so Paul writes his letter.

But perhaps from the message title, you may have guessed that I don’t want to focus on the conflicts--today, anyway. I think it will be more helpful for us to focus on the resources Paul reminds Timothy he has available, to face problems of faith and life and leadership in the church. How can you stay motivated in difficult times? How do you live as a Christian when the pressure is on? I’m going to draw out Paul’s answers to these questions from our text today. Paul offers three helps.

First, Paul tells Timothy to remember his calling from God in Jesus Christ. Paul reminded Timothy that God had told a prophet in their church to announce in public that Timothy was to be set aside for ministry—that’s verse 18. This was a fact; it happened; it is unchangeable. Facts are what to stand on when your feelings want to drag you off into some corner and give up. God called Tim to ministry, and God let everyone know it, including Paul. That call had not been rescinded. And God provides resources for the assignment He gives. So

even in the middle of discouraging conflict, Tim is to remember his calling, and reach for the resources that come from his connection with God.

Auburn Presbyterian Church people, what is a ministry to which God has called you? Whom are you serving, what needs are you meeting (perhaps together) that makes a difference? If APC disappeared tomorrow, would anyone besides us in the Auburn area notice? Your commission to ministry was your baptism. Your calling into ministry was your baptism—which we renew every January, together. How is your deliberate, explicit ministry of word and deed going, as you bring others the core of the good news, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners like us? How can our church help and encourage you, as you help and encourage others?

Second, Paul tells Timothy to remember his apprenticeship with Paul, and Paul's confidence in him. Verse 18, again, is where Paul writes of his "charge" to Tim, his commission that the younger man step up to this responsibility. Paul believes Tim can do it. That expression of confidence from his mentor has power for Tim. He hears that, and he takes courage—takes heart—and re-engages in this ministry for which he has been called.

You older men and women need to be mentoring younger men and women. I want you to start building relationships across the age groups in our church, and to get acquainted with some younger men and women. Starting out with children, or becoming the parents of teenagers is a challenge no younger parents should have to face alone. Disappointment in career or business, attacks by difficult circumstances—who are you meeting or supporting in such times? People around church don't wear a sign saying, "Help!" We have to get to know each other, build trust, and listen. Then we earn the right to be heard, and to encourage others like Paul encouraged Timothy.

Third, Paul tells Timothy to grasp the gratitude that comes from remembering his calling, and feeling Paul's trust and confidence.

Paul was a grateful guy. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul begins, "I thank God whom I serve as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers...." (2 Tim 1:3, NIV) In this first chapter of this first letter, his gratitude shows up most strongly as he refers to God's grace reaching down to him, "the worst of sinners". In his letters to churches, he routinely begins with a section of praise and thanks, and sometimes breaks into song! (The whole first chapter of Philippians is thanks and praise, and chapter 2 contains what might have been an early song about Jesus.)

Switching to an attitude of gratitude—especially by invoking our memories, which is our choice—does a number of helpful, health-ful things for us. Gratitude lowers our blood pressure, calms our hearts. Gratitude lowers our stress levels and the production of cortisol, which does nasty things to us if it's too high, too long. With less stress, we think more clearly, we can look ahead for consequences of a move we might make now. With less stress, our choices widen, we make better decisions, we have more capacity to act, instead of just react. Switching to an attitude of gratitude is just practical.

But doesn't it also feel good to be grateful? Why would we deprive ourselves of gratitude? Why would we want to live without gratitude?

When the heat is on, when there seems to be no way to solve the problem, it's natural to fall into a funk. Being grateful opens up the blinders that stress puts on our eyes. We take your

eyes off our problems, and “look up”—for mostly, it’s God we are thanking for our parents, or the capacities God has given us, or even the difficult challenges that God has helped us transform into our greatest gifts. Look up--and you know, in time, things will “look up”, too.

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Now we move from hearing God’s Word to grabbing God’s grace in the Lord’s Supper. This regular ritual is no empty habit, unless you let it become that, and then you’re in spiritual danger. Paul reminds us in First Corinthians 11:27-29: “[...] whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A person ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.”

The way to come to the Lord’s Table comes from one of the names for this holy act; it’s often called, The Eucharist. “Eucharist” comes from Greek, and it means, “good gift”, or “thanksgiving”. (No turkey and dressing here; this is a much earlier thanksgiving feast, the way Jesus told us to do it.) The Lord’s Supper is a meal of gratitude, and we ought to have an attitude of gratitude when we come to this Table, or we should not come at all; we should take a “pass”, and focus on how we might BECOME ready to participate in thankfulness. Are you not grateful for the love of God that took you in when you knew you didn’t deserve it? Are you not grateful for the love of God that gave up his son to take the penalty of your sin and mine? Are you not grateful for the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit in you, keeping you connected with Jesus so that you hear from God and serve God with a full heart? But if you are grateful, if you have an attitude of gratitude, if you know you want more of Jesus in you, then this Supper is for you, too.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California  
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