

⁸ So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God. ⁹ He 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, ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. ¹² That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.

¹³ What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. (2 Timothy 1:8-14 NIV2011)

Guard Your Gift

July 4th, Independence Day, you can almost smell grilled food and burnt gun powder of fireworks from the moment you wake up in the morning. Today, you get to be unabashedly American. Stars and stripes on everything. “I’m Proud to Be American” is on repeat. Fireworks leading up to this day will reach their crescendo tonight when Valentine will sound like a warzone with loud blasts and bright colors. Today, there are only three colors: Red, white, and blue. Today is about freedom, enjoying your freedoms, and protecting freedom. How you treat the gift, how you use it, what you do with it, how you talk about it, is a proclamation from yourself to others how you view the gift of freedom. How you chose to do that today is on you—keep it legal and according to God’s will.

How you choose to treat the gift that Paul talks about in 2 Timothy is a different story. How you treat this gift has much further reaching consequences than how you celebrate the Fourth of July. How you treat God’s gift affects the people in your home, your family, your friends and coworkers, the person standing behind you at the grocery store. It affects your life here on earth and beyond. This is the gift of faith and everything we receive through faith. It’s the Word of God, sins forgiven, freedom from sin’s control and the tyranny of the devil, peace with God in life and confidence as we face death, eternal life with God—this is what God gives to you. How do you treat this gift, how you use it, how you speak about it is a proclamation to yourself and others how you view this gift. Are you proud of this gift? Are you ashamed?

Paul gets it. He knows the temptation is there even if we don’t recognize it. Paul knows what it looks like. He’s sitting there in chains in Rome. He’s in prison because of the testimony of Lord. He knows the situation doesn’t look very good. This isn’t the type of publicity you want to promote a movement. No, today such a person would need to

resign and the company would be discussing how to move forward from this. This isn't something you would proud of...

On top of that is the teaching itself. The truth of Christ crucified and raised from the dead was not a legal religion in the empire. It would not have been socially advantageous, a boost to your status, or any benefit in that society to be a Christian. It flew in the face of societal norms. It was unabashedly bold in its proclamation. It rejected the notion of worshipping the emperor as god. Against mighty Rome who reigned supreme, Paul taught Christ is Lord over all. It's for this witness of Christ that Paul sits in jail. Paul knows his days are numbered. He is sure that it's only a matter of time before he will be executed for this faith he confesses. So he writes this letter, 2 Timothy; his last will and testament to a man who is not only a colleague in the ministry but to one that Paul sees as his own son. Paul knows how hard this will be for him so he tells young Pastor Timothy: **“Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner”** (v.8).

You've felt that before, haven't you? Being ashamed? It's more than just feeling bad about something you did. There's embarrassment. It recognizes you did something that affects your relationships and how other people will look at them for their connection to you. Your mess splashes onto others. You feel like an outcast. You know she would look down on you if she found out. You know he would not accept you or what you did. Feeling shame comes from knowing you failed. You disappointed someone. You didn't live up to someone's—maybe even your own—expectations. When you feel ashamed, you don't want to talk about it. You don't want to bring it up. You want to keep it hidden. You would be devastated if anyone knew. It's the opposite of being proud. Even if you do find yourself doing it again, it's only a certain group who knows. And still we try to hide it.

I'm ashamed to admit that too often I treat God's gift, His Word like this. I think you can relate. It can feel awkward to talk about spiritual things with family and friends. Is that because the timing doesn't feel right or is it because you are ashamed of what you believe? It's difficult to confront the sinner. Maybe that's because you are ashamed of your own sins. Is it also because you are ashamed of what God's Word says? After all, you have tell this person that what they are doing is wrong when the rest of the world is saying otherwise. Other people may try and shame you: “How can you say there's only one way to be saved? How can you say what I believe is wrong? Why can't you accept me for who I am?” And too often it works. You may find yourself apologizing for what God's Word says. You might find yourself feeling almost embarrassed and blaming “that's just what our church teaches.”

We stand idly by, laugh along with the jokes, ignore what is said because you are afraid of how it might affect your standing with a friend. You are afraid of losing that certain status with another person. You are sure that you will suffer in some way. That's being ashamed. Your relationship with Jesus is the most important thing; but do you treat like something you put it on while in church and take off once you get home? Ever find yourself feeling awkward telling someone you can't do something because you want to go to God's House or spend time in God's Word? Do we hold back on prayer because you we are ashamed to ask for help? Do we hold back because we are ashamed to ask for forgiveness again? Do you feel ashamed because you actually believe you need this?

The greatest threat to your faith is not the world around you, the scheming devil himself or anyone else. They cannot take it from you. The greatest threat is you, how you view this gift, and how you treat it. Jesus warns: "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, I will be ashamed of them when I return" (Mark 8:38). Lord, have mercy.

Paul knows the temptation. He knows the suffering. So he encourages Timothy and us: don't be ashamed of this message or me being in prison. **"For I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day"** (v.12). In other words, there is nothing to be ashamed of. Even when facing his own death, Paul remains convinced. This wasn't something Paul came to know on his own. Paul didn't have a moment of extreme brilliance where he discovered the truth of God to give him such confidence to live and die. Paul did not come to God. No, God called Paul. God worked in Paul's heart to see the truth. God convinced Paul so that even when suffering in prison Paul will not be ashamed of the gospel and witness of Christ. He doesn't see himself as the emperor's prisoner; he is the Lord's prisoner. Whatever happened to him, Paul knows he is entirely safe in the Lord's hands. There's nothing to be ashamed of: he's right where the Lord wants him and has called him to be.

It's that same Lord who is the one saving you, calling you, and has you exactly where he you wants to be. It's not because of some work you had done or accomplishment you will do. But according to God's plan since before time, according to his purpose, according to his grace and love he calls you with a holy calling that sets you apart from the status-seeking, people-pleasing world. This isn't some pie-in-the-sky dream or happy thoughts. It's not another philosophy in competition with the other religions of this world. It's not just one way of many different ways to help you get through life. It's rooted in a person: the man Jesus whose office is Christ, God's Chosen One. God did not reveal this grace in mere teaching and preaching. It's made known in the bodily appearance of Jesus in the flesh and blood. Jesus appears for you. He is not ashamed of you, but calls you brother; he calls you sister. He appears to forgive all your sins, to take away your shame, to set you free, to give you peace in life even while facing death by

conquering death for us. Death has no power here for His people. We see a glimpse of that when Jesus tells a dead twelve-year old, “Little girl, I say to you, get up.” And she does.

But how does this help with giving us confidence right now, to not be ashamed? If you already know how the end of the book will turn out, the rest of the book in between is just filler. It won't change the end. Since the fall into sin, mankind has been trying to figure out what to do with the endings of our books called life. What can we do about death? In Jesus you have your answer: he destroyed it. Death could not keep him down. It has no power here in the tomb. He's risen, just as he said. Every leader of every religion in this world dies, including Jesus. But Jesus is different: he lives again and still lives. This means that death can no longer conquer us. People die and you and I are still mortal with expiration dates. But the sin that made death deadly, and the guilt that made us worthy of eternal death in hell has been removed with Jesus' death and rising from the dead. Death has lost sting. Thanks be to God he gives us the victory in our flesh and blood Savior Jesus. We don't just fade into non-existence. We don't return as something else. We live. One day these lowly bodies will be transformed to be like his glorious body. We know the end. So until that day arrives, like Paul, we rest secure in God's hands. Because Jesus lives, your status is secure with God. God is already pleased with you. God is on your side. If God is for us, who can be against us?

There's nothing to be ashamed of when it comes to this gift of God. Instead, guard it. Hold onto this sound teaching that is God's Word that has been entrusted with you. You have a personal responsibility to what you do with this gift; no one else can make you do anything. Watch your life and your teaching closely that it is in accordance with God's Word. Guard the truth of God's Word in faith and love; your life—eternal life—literally depends on it. How you use it, how you treat it, shows itself in how you live so that your family at home, your friends, the stranger at the store sees you don't just say the right things, you live it. If that all sounds a little overwhelming, be assured: you aren't facing this on your own. You are a baptized child of God and the Holy Spirit who created this saving faith in your heart to receive this gift has taken up residence within you. Through the Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit works to strengthen your grip on this gift and will keep you in this true faith until life everlasting. That also means you need be in the Word. Make regular use of the Sacrament. Guard your gift. Amen.