

I love how Paul says it, “This is my gospel.” My gospel. As Paul wrote this letter, he was in jail. This is the last book he wrote. He was dying. Not of old age. He was going to be killed. That’s suffering! Was he afraid? Did he have second thoughts? If he did, he took them to Jesus. “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descendent of David.” I bet Paul said that little creed to himself over and over again in prison. “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descendent of David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained!” Jesus his Savior was so close, so personal to Paul that he was not going to trade Jesus for anything in the whole world. “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descendent of David. This is my gospel!”

Martin Luther had a special way to remember Jesus Christ. You’ve probably seen Luther’s personal seal. He made it to reflect his beliefs. Each part of the seal had a special meaning. There’s one part of the seal that I never really noticed before. It often isn’t included in pictures you see today. Luther wrote a single word around that seal. VIVIT. It’s Latin for, “he lives!” Jesus lives. VIVIT. That little word makes all the difference. Jesus died for you. He rose for you. He won for you. Jesus lives! I love this quote: “If someone is able to predict his own death and resurrection and then actually pull it off, I’m with that guy!” I’m with Jesus, and Jesus lives!

That got Paul so excited—remember, he’s sitting in a dungeon!—that he started singing! At least he wrote a poem that sure sounds like a hymn: “If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.” The Bible promises that you died with Christ when you were baptized and came to faith in Jesus. If we died with Christ, what will happen? We will live with him! It sure looks like Christianity is losing around the world. But the Bible promises that if we endure, what will happen? We will reign with Jesus! It’s so easy to choose someone else’s approval over God’s. But if we disown Jesus—if we reject him, what will happen? He will disown us. This is a matter of life or death. Whose approval counts!

But the last phrase is the best—at least in my opinion: “If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.” If we are faithless... That’s not even a question. We sin—all the time! Then what will happen? We’d expect, “Jesus will be faithless to us!” No. Not Jesus. He’s not like us! “He will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.” Jesus always keeps his promises. No matter where you’ve been or how you’ve sinned, Jesus is always faithful. He forgives and saves sinners—us! “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.” This is your gospel. There is nothing so precious as Jesus. If they welcome or fail to welcome... If they listen or fail to listen... If they like or fail to like... If they accept you or reject you... Know that you have the approval of the only one who really counts—Jesus!

2 Timothy 2:1-13  
Pastor Nathan Nass

Pentecost 5  
July 9, 2017

**You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. <sup>3</sup> Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. <sup>4</sup> No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer. <sup>5</sup> Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules. <sup>6</sup> The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. <sup>7</sup> Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this. <sup>8</sup> Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, <sup>9</sup> for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained. <sup>10</sup> Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. <sup>11</sup> Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; <sup>12</sup> if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; <sup>13</sup> if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.**

### Whose Approval Counts?

It was going to be a great homecoming. Not like high school—even better! Jesus the carpenter’s son was coming home to Nazareth for the first time as Jesus the Savior! You’d expect a parade—like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. At least a big family reunion like people do in the summer. Jesus preached his first sermon in his hometown. When he got done, what would you expect? A standing ovation? “Great job, Jesus!” Except, his neighbors said, “Where did this man get these things? Isn’t this the carpenter? And they took offense at him” (Mark 6:2-3). Not what you’d expect! If that’s what happened to Jesus in his own hometown.... Rejected! What should we expect to happen to us?

There was a young man struggling with that very question. His name was Timothy. By God’s grace, Timothy had been a life-long believer in Jesus. Two dear women—his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice—had taught him about God since he was a baby. Then the apostle Paul himself had trained him to be a pastor. If anybody was on the right track, it was Timothy! Except when he preached God’s Word, there was a surprise! Not everybody listened. In fact, people didn’t like it. People persecuted him. It was hard! So he began to feel timid, weak, ashamed. “Can I endure this? Is it worth it? Whose approval really counts—God’s or people’s?”

Do you know those feelings? Have you felt that tension? Being a Christian doesn’t result in as many happy homecomings as we might expect. How many times don’t we have to choose: God’s approval or people’s approval? So whose approval counts? “God’s! Of

course, it's all about God!" Is that really true? Are you telling me that God's approval really means more to you than anything else in the world? So why do we keep quiet when we know just what that person needs to hear? Why do we try to please him or her instead of Jesus? Whose approval counts? What I really want is to get love from God and love from everybody else all at the same time! But it didn't work that way for Jesus. It didn't work that way for Timothy. So whose approval counts?

Like a father writing to his dear son, the apostle Paul writes Timothy—this young pastor—a letter. To encourage his friend, Paul tells some stories. He wrote, "*Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer.*" When you are in the military whom are you trying to please? One guy—the person in charge! If you're out to please yourself, you won't last long. If you're out to please your friends, you won't last long. Just one person's approval counts. You can't have divided loyalties. A good soldier wants to please his commanding officer. Is that me?

Now think of an athlete. "*If anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules.*" Being an athlete takes hard work and sacrifice. To get there, that athlete focuses on one thing—just one thing—receiving the victor's crown. But he's got to compete according to the rules. Remember Lance Armstrong? He competed hard. He won lots of cycling crowns. And then he had them all stripped away, because he used performance enhancing drugs. An athlete competes hard, focused on one big goal, but he trusts the wisdom of the person who made the rules and competes faithfully to them. Is that me?

How about a farmer? "*The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.*" It takes a lot of work to be a farmer! Long days. Sometimes long nights! Physical labor. Dedication to your farm. It's hard work! Is it worth it? Yes! As long as he's focused on his goal. A farmer knows that his work has a purpose, that's he's going to receive a share of the crops—just what he and his family needs. If he loses focus on that harvest... If he focuses all his time on the Twins or Wheel a Fortune, there won't be any harvest. But what farmer does that? A farmer works hard, focused on his goal, because he knows what's coming in the future. Is that me?

Paul lets these stories sit in our minds. He doesn't explain them. A soldier pleasing his commanding officer... An athlete competing according to the rules... A farmer working hard for his share of the crop... "*Reflect on what I am saying,*" Paul says, "*for the Lord will give you insight into all this.*" Do you have some insight? Each one—a soldier, an athlete, a farmer—has one goal. At least the good ones do! Despite difficulty, despite sacrifice, they aren't distracted by everything going on around them. Because they want the prize—the harvest, the victor's crown, to please the commanding officer... So whose approval counts? God's! "*Reflect on what I'm saying!*"

As I reflect on what Paul was saying, do you know what's one of my biggest strug-

gles as a pastor? I want you to like me. I want to say things that you want to hear. So whose approval counts to me? Too often it's yours, not God's! Why do I feel that way? I know that's not right! Why is it so hard for me to confront people who are content to live in sin? Why don't I want to make people feel bad for neglecting God's Word? Why am I tempted to soften what God says to please people? A pastor friend confessed to me just a few weeks ago, "I've got to get over having everybody like me!" That's me too. You know what verse in the Bible really hits me? Paul in Galatians writes, "*If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ*" (Galatians 1:10).

That's just something pastors struggle with, right? I don't think so! Whose approval are you living for? I know this is a hard thing to talk about. It's hard, because we sin! What's more important to you: The approval of your family or the approval of God? Whom would you rather fit in with—that group of friends or Jesus? Who are you most concerned about pleasing—that boyfriend or girlfriend or your Savior? If family pushes back, we need to stop, right? If there's tension, I need to quiet down. If they want to do it, I better just join along. A timid, ashamed, quiet Christian—how many of us does that describe? Whose approval counts most in your life?

Jesus entered his hometown, knowing exactly what the people wanted to hear. Instead, he told them God's word. And they rejected him. But I sure want to be accepted in my hometown! God called Ezekiel to be his prophet and told him: "*You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen...*" (Ezekiel 2:7). But if they don't listen, I just want to stay quiet! Paul told Timothy: "*Endure hardship with us as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.*" But I think, "Actually, I'd rather not endure hardship, Paul!" "*Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.*" Whose approval counts? Ask yourself that—often. I can see why Timothy was timid. I am too.

So Paul wrote, "*Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel...*" When you're struggling, have you ever had your mom or dad pull you aside, put their arm around you, and help you put everything in perspective? It's like Paul puts his arm around Timothy—caught up in worry, pressured to appease, heart racing—and says, "*Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.*" It's like a little creed. Short and sweet. You could memorize it! Of all the beautiful things about Jesus, here's two to hold dear: He rose from the dead, and he's the descendent of David. He's the promised Savior. Remember Jesus!

Paul doesn't tell Timothy, "Keep your head up, it's going to get better." He doesn't say, "Just focus on what you can control," or "Look inside yourself." He says, "*You, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.*" He says, "*Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.*" He says, "*Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descendent of David.*" What does each of those encouragements have in common? "Jesus Christ!" Dear children of God, bought with Jesus' blood, are you facing suffering, heartache, rejection? "*Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.*" In Jesus Christ I have what I so often look for in others. Approval—God's approval!