

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Nineteenth Sunday Morning After Pentecost, October 10, 2004

I struggled over what to title this sermon. In the beginning I had entitled it, "Presenting God the Very Best." Then I thought about "The Unchained Word of God." Another came to mind. "Workers Unashamed." My theology professor at Southern Seminary, Dale Moody, now in Paradise, has one of his books bearing the title, The Word of Truth. So I considered the title, "The Word of Truth." None of these seemed to do.

In the course of my meditation, I kept focusing on Paul's statement about "*being chained like a criminal*" in verse 9. I was on my way to the office Tuesday morning, after dropping Nicholas off at school, and I saw a familiar sight. Two or three days each week, I see state prisoners working on the school grounds – mowing, trimming, raking, and moving debris. As I passed them, I started singing in my head that old Sam Cooke classic that reached number 2 on the Billboard chart in 1960: "The Chain Gang." Can you just hear it? "That's the sound of the men working on the chain gang." Now if you'll listen to the oldies' station, you'll hear it every once in a while. Or if you watch my favorite television show, "American Dreams," you'll hear it from time-to-time.

Now it is true that those guys I see during the week don't have chains on their feet. But they do hold membership in a gang that is chained metaphorically. They are in prison. Each is a criminal and imprisoned for some crime that was committed.

As I drove on, thinking of their plight, rolling out of my mind was Sam Cooke and rolling into my mind was this text from 2 Timothy 2. Again the statement Paul issued about the Gospel started playing it self over and over. He had suffered hardship for the Gospel, of which he was unashamed, even to the point of being chained like a convict. In Rome, where Paul was imprisoned, he held membership in the chain gang. But in another realm, the realm of God's kingdom, he held membership in the unchained gang, which took its cue from the unchained word of God. He wanted Timothy to know that he, too, held membership in the same group – the unchained gang.

The reality is that each of us who professes faith in Christ holds membership in the same gang that certainly is unchained. I'm aware of the fact that designating you and me as "gang members" may not be the most politically correct thing to do since "gang member" has a not so good connotation. But that's what we are, at least in this moment since that's the sermon's title. You'll work with me, won't you? Right now that's not such a bad designation when you consider it.

Think about it. Take, for example, Peter's designation. He says we are "*aliens*" (1 Peter 2:11). Can you imagine me standing here during the welcome a few moments ago and saying, "I'd like to welcome the aliens called Tabernacle Baptist Church to worship today. It's good to see all my alien brothers and sisters this Lord's Day. Now those of you who aren't aliens, all us aliens are glad you're here with us. We'd like for each of you to consider becoming an alien and joining us in our sojourn from this life to the next life in Heaven." What a way to welcome people. So maybe "gang" isn't too bad.

You've figured out by now that I'm using "gang" in a good way. Christians are a team. Christians find commonality. Christians work together. We are no longer imprisoned to a sinful way of life. We are unchained from that way of living. Holding membership in the unchained gang is to be in a most privileged company. Together we are unchained to freely and gladly do our very best, to be as diligent as we can be to present ourselves to God, workers in His world, in His kingdom, unashamed, who rightly explain the truth.

Now there's as unusual idea. "*Rightly explaining the truth*" (v. 15). You mean the truth needs explaining? I suppose it does since Paul says that it needs to be done rightly and not wrongly. Back in the mid-first century, near the end of his life, he challenged and commissioned this young pastor named Timothy to the task of explaining the truth among the believers in Ephesus, since that is where Timothy

was, because there were those who sought to chain the word of truth with three-quarters truth or two-thirds truth or half-truth or a third or fourth or an eighth of truth or absolutely no truth – so help me God!

Membership in the unchained gang revolves around the issue of truth. If ever there was a need for the truth it is now. Oh, I'll be glad when the election is over. I'm tired of half-truths and no truths from both political parties. It is disgraceful. It is sinful. The Democratic Party has sent out an email stating that if President Bush is reelected, the draft will be reinstated. I hope you don't believe that. The Republican Party mailed a piece to folks in West Virginia saying that if the Democrats win and Senator Kerry is elected, the Bible will be banned. I hope you don't believe that either.

It seems to me that neither political party is really honest. Neither is concerned about truth telling. Neither embodies the truth in the manner Jesus spoke of truth: let your yes be yes and your no be no. This is why it comes back to you and me – the unchained gang. If anybody is to embody and model truth it is you and I. So membership in the unchained gang really does revolve around the issue of truth – real truth and not pseudo-truth.

As we think about firstfruits living and giving over the next four or five Sundays, allow me to take a few moments to encourage us “gang members” to heed some requirements when it comes to membership in the unchained gang, utilizing this text Paul penned to Timothy long ago. For those of you who don't like the thought of “requirements,” well, let's use the grammatical construction: imperatives or “commands.”

Membership in the unchained gang requires us to **remember Jesus Christ**. Emphatically Paul called Timothy to remember Jesus Christ. It was a command. I don't think we remember Him enough. I know I certainly don't. Do you? What do you remember about Christ? When is the last time you earnestly gave consideration to the meaning of His life? He was supernatural. Descended right from the line of King David, He was also, and still is, a real flesh and blood person.

To remember Jesus Christ – who He is and what He is about – is to embark on a course that is marked by integrity and devotion. That's the way I encapsulate Him when I remember Him: integrity and devotion. We are no longer chained to the course of the world, which, more often than not, is indicated by dastardly deeds of dishonestly and infidelity.

Real people remember Jesus Christ and they seek to do that which is honest and to do so with devotion, even if it is painful. Last fall a group of Amish youth in rural Ohio hid in a cornfield and threw tomatoes at cars as they passed by. One driver came back with a shotgun and fired into the cornfield, killing one of the youth. Earlier this year the story was mentioned in US News and World Report. The father of the dead prankster was a friend of the shooter. The youths wrote a letter of apology to the local papers, asking the community to forgive them for the prank that turned deadly. The family of the child who was killed offered forgiveness to the guy who unloaded the shotgun blast into the field. The dead boy's mother said, “I had forgiven him before I knew who it was.” There is a person of integrity and devotion. How did she do that? Surely she was able to do that by remembering Jesus Christ.

Don't you think that is how Paul managed while in prison? He remembered Jesus Christ. Remembering Him in His deity and His humanity must have gotten Paul through some most difficult moments in a cold prison cell. Remembering Jesus, along with thinking about Timothy and other believers, and what it means to be unchained from sin enabled him to forgive those who did harm. He was empowered to endure.

Now when you and I remember Jesus Christ – that integrity and devotion stuff – we realize we are to **endure everything** for the sake of other gang members. Another requirement to be in the gang. Did you notice Paul's confession? **“I endure everything for the sake of the elect” (v. 10)**. He had a passion for believers and their well-being. One is to have a heart for other believers. Maybe that is what was going on with that Amish mother in Ohio. Maybe the shooter was a believer. Regardless, unchained gang members are to have a heart of endurance for people in general, but for believers in particular.

Paul was locked up in jail. He really was chained. He suffered. He had been beaten in times past. No doubt he was beaten, perhaps, while incarcerated in Rome. All of this was for the “*elect*.” There’s another one of those descriptions. “I’d like to welcome “*the elect*” this morning.” For the sake of fellow believers, Paul was enduring – enduring everything. His endurance was physical, yes. But it was also emotional.

I am unaware of many of us in this worship room who are actually enduring physical suffering for the sake of other believers, let alone Jesus Christ. Anybody here being persecuted? I mean really persecuted for the sake of other believers and Christ? I’m certainly not. So what do we do with this if it is a requirement for membership in the unchained gang?

I think sometimes we just have to endure the elect for the sake of the elect. Do people ever get on your nerves? I mean there are just some people out there aren’t there? I was in seminary with a guy from Brooklyn, NY. Philippe was as hard-headed as they come. He was on the Master of Divinity Student Council with 11 others. My good friend Charlie Johnson, who is pastor of a church in San Antonio, Texas now, was the chairperson and I was the secretary. Philippe was way out there. He drove us to near insanity. A couple of times Charlie was ready to blow up at him. A few times I wanted to blow up. We controlled each other. I certainly wanted to take a chain and chain Philippe’s mouth.

I’ll be the first to tell you that I sometimes find myself chained to a lack of endurance. Call it impatience. Call it frailty. Call it whatever. I’ve realized over the years that everybody isn’t going to see it my way, do it my way, live it my way, and believe it my way. You know what? The older I get, the happier I am that this is the case. It’s okay for a different perspective so long as it is offered with humility, integrity, and devotion. So we endure the Philippes of the world because the Philippes of the world endure the Jimmys of the world. We even endure the Charlies of the world. We, Jimmy, Charlie, and Philippe, *remind* each other of the importance of truth telling and hopefully “*avoid wrangling over words*” (v. 14), which gets us nowhere.

So there is a call to diligence if one is to hold membership in the unchained gang. Unchained gang members are to do their very best at presenting their real selves to God. To Timothy Paul uttered, “*Do your best*” (v. 15). I suppose that is the question for all of us. Are we doing our best? Are we really being diligent at remembering Jesus Christ? Are we really being industrious at enduring everything for the sake of the brothers and sisters?

I came across something that says,

You can’t control the length of your life, but you can control its width and depth.
 You can’t control the contour of your countenance, but you can control its expression.
 You can’t control the other person’s opportunities, but you can seize upon your own
 and make the best of them.
 You can’t control the weather, but you can control the atmosphere, which surrounds you.
 You can’t control the distance that your head will be above the ground, but you can
 control the level of the contents of that head.
 You can’t control the other person’s annoying faults, but you can see to it that you yourself
 do not develop or harbor similar propensities.

That’s a good Christ-like approach to life. It’s indicative of people who take seriously firstfruits living and giving. It’s a good description of people who hold membership in the unchained gang. So in what gang are you a member?

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All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from The New Revised Standard Version, 1989.