

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness—² a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time,³ and at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior,

⁴*To Titus, my true son in our common faith:*

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

⁵*The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.* ⁶*An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.* ⁷*Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.* ⁸*Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.* ⁹*He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. (Titus 1:1-9)*

God Sends Workers Out

A funny thing happened to me this week. I was visiting one of our members and I asked her if she wanted to take communion. When I opened my communion set, the wine was frozen. I always leave it in the car so that I have it with me. The nights this week were so cold, that I had to hold the bottle in my hands to melt the ice. Obviously, the wine we use for communion must have a fairly low alcohol content. So, is it the best tool for celebrating the Lord's Supper? The freezing issue could lead to a whole bunch of opinions about other aspects like the taste or the price or label. And some other wine might be better. But the wine we use did do the job on that call. It will do the job in just a few minutes because the power is not in the wine. It's in the word of God. So the body and blood of our Lord will be here in, with and under the bread and wine.

Now, I don't actually want to talk to you this morning about which wine to use in communion. I want to talk about another something else that can appoints for service in the church: people. St. Paul talks to us today about the ministry. Pastors and teachers are like the wine that God uses for communion. We are imperfect. Some of us are more likeable or more gifted than others. But even so, God gets his work done. Pastors and teachers are gifts that he gives to his church to do what he sends us to do. That's the point I want to share with you this morning: **God sends workers out.**

I.

St. Paul calls himself, “**a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness.**” What is an apostle? It's a Greek word that means someone who is sent out. All true ministers of the gospel are first and foremost servants of God. But what is their job? **God sends workers out – to do what?**

Paul tells us: he was sent out “for the faith of God's elect.” What does that mean? It means that we spread the gospel to people who don't know it. But in this context, Paul seems to be talking more about strengthening the faith of the elect while they are living here in this sinful world. Often life is difficult. Here at Peace we operate a school. Many of us are parents and grandparents, so we have a vested interest in those kids, don't we? Some kids struggle with homework. And we parents wrestle with that. Some kids do well in school, but they struggle to make friends, and our hearts break for them. Some kids have learning problems. Some kids have serious health issues. Every one of those things causes worry and frustration.

If you zoom out from the school and you look at life in general here in southeast Michigan, you see even more sources of hurt and frustration and tears: conflict at home or at work or even at church, financial difficulties, more health problems, the death of people we love, alcohol issues, crime related issues, and the list could go on and on. Life on this earth is always a package deal. God gives us blessings – a church, children, spouses, parents, jobs. And we're glad we have those blessings. But with every one of those blessings comes

hurt and sorrow, because we live in a sinful world. So God sends pastors and teachers to build up his people's trust in him.

And he sends us to build up the knowledge that leads to godliness. It's my job and the job of our teachers to teach God's people to live as Christ calls us to. How do we do that? Well, Paul says that the knowledge that leads to godliness rests on the hope of eternal life. So the number one thing that I can do to teach you to live for Christ is to tell you about Christ – his love, his sacrifice, his forgiveness. That gospel message is the foundation of a new and holy life. We don't obey out of fear, as if God was just waiting to let us have it. We obey because we are loved and forgiven and comforted.

But once we know our Savior and want to live for him, there is a need for us to teach what that life looks like. So we do teach the commandments to guide our members, children and adults, in a new life. We also need at times to curb sin. In the school, things like grades and late slips and consequences help to curb the sinful nature so that the believer can hear the word and grow. And even in the congregation at large, we need the occasional rebuke to stop sin in its tracks before it overwhelms us.

But the faith that clings to God and the knowledge that leads to living for God are based on the hope of eternal life. Paul says, **“God, who does not lie, promised [it] before the beginning of time, and at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior.”** We have a sure and certain hope, a hope that cannot fail, because God made a promise before the world began: he promised to send his Son to be our Savior. When the time was right, Jesus came. Then God sent the message of that Savior to claim us. So no matter how much life hurts, no matter how frustrated we parents or our children are, no matter how tough life gets here, we are going to win in the end.

Jesus came to conquer all sin for us – your sin and my sin, the sin of all the world. He died and he rose and he washed our sin away. He promised us a new and better life to come. When he returns, that new life will begin. Until he returns, he sends guys like me and people like our teachers to constantly proclaim Jesus to us. And then he works through that gospel to give us hope, to enable us to trust even when we can't see how all this could be for our good, and to live for him in a world that ridicules doing that. God loves us so much that he carefully and deliberately decides who to send to each and every church on earth. Every pastor and teacher who has served here was God's gift to you – even if you didn't appreciate them. Even if you can't see how this pastor or this teacher could possibly be a blessing to you and your family, trust in God's love and his plan and give thanks for that minister of the word.

II.

Now, that doesn't mean that some pastors or teachers aren't more gifted than others. It doesn't mean that you can't personally like some workers more than you do others. But God does call us to love and support the workers he sends us. At the same time, God lays down qualifications for service in his church. The only real evaluation we get to do is whether or not this pastor or this teacher is serving as God commands. The interesting thing about the qualifications is that they have very little to do with what a guy like me is good at. They're mostly about the kind of people we are. **God sends workers out – to be what?**

St. Paul explained what when he commanded Titus to appoint “elders” in every congregation in Crete. He also speaks of “overseers.” These two words really mean the same things – pastors and teachers. Paul says, **“An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.”** The key word here is “blameless.” Now when he says that, he doesn't mean sinless. If he did, there would be a lot of vacancies in our churches. So what does he mean? We're supposed to lead Christian lives. We're not supposed to be open to the charge of public sin. So it is possible for a minister who is completely repentant and who has been forgiven, to lose the status of being blameless. If he has committed public sins that bring shame on the ministry, he has to leave the ministry and he may never be able to return.

The key issue is character. Paul talks about not being overbearing or quick tempered or someone who drinks too much. A minister has to be trustworthy and hospitable. God expects pastors and teachers to model a Christian life. If you think that's easy, let me tell you, it's a daily challenge. I've known pastors and teachers who have burned out under that responsibility. And I've known family members who have found this to be a very difficult burden because God requires the spouses and children of pastors and teachers to reflect their faith. It's possible for a family member to cause a minister to leave the ministry because the way that family member lives makes the teaching of that pastor or teacher seem like hypocrisy.

If you look at all that Paul says here, you'll only find one qualification that is something to be learned. Paul says, **"He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it."** Even the way he says it here, it focuses more on character than it does on the level of knowledge. But how can you hold to the message if you don't know it? We need our ministers to have a deep knowledge of God's word. Then we need them to stand on that word, to insist on the truth. They need to encourage others by sound doctrine. Nothing good comes in the church from letting false doctrine slide. The Greek word translated here as "sound" literally means "healthy." Healthy doctrine makes for healthy Christian faith. Diseased doctrine makes for sick and contaminated Christian faith. And insisting on the truth means resisting false teaching.

That is the standard for judging your pastors and teachers. There are a number of ways we can struggle with these instructions. One way is to judge the ministers God sends us by a different standard. Do we like them? Do they bore us or keep us interested? Are they deep thinkers? Do we agree with how they go about their ministry? Are they good at raising money? Those are actually meaningless questions. God calls your pastors and teachers to be blameless – to lead Christian lives and to have families that lead Christian lives. And he calls us to know the word and teach the word and stand up to false teaching. If your pastors and teachers are doing those things, God calls you to love and support them, even if you find them to be unlikeable people.

Another challenge we face in this regard is that we don't want to insist on this stuff. We love our pastor. We love our teachers. If they've sinned and must leave the ministry, we ask, "Don't we forgive them?" And what we mean by that question is, "Don't we give them their job back?" But those two things aren't the same. Yes, we do forgive all sinners, including ministers who are guilty of public sin. We welcome them back to the congregation. We invite them to communion and we pray for them and provide as much emotional support as we possibly can. But that doesn't mean that they get to publicly represent the Lord or the church when they are no longer blameless. That's a hard truth, but it is God's truth.

Do we accept all that God says here? I think it's easy for us to do it mentally. But on a gut level, I think it's hard. We think we should be able to fire teachers that frustrate us. We think we should be able to keep pastors that we like to listen to or that we're close personally. In the end, we think that God should let us decide what the qualification for the ministry should be. That is just pride and sin. It's rebellion against God. We can make all kinds of pious noise and excuses, but in the end, refusing to listen to God is what sends people to hell.

But Christ died even for this sin. He alone was a perfect minister of the gospel and all of us imperfect sinners in the ministry are forgiven by his blood. He alone was a perfect congregation member. All of us who struggle with what God says are forgiven by his blood. Jesus died for our insistence on telling God who should serve in his kingdom. Jesus rose and God wiped our sin away. Then in love, God sent his word and God called workers to come to every church on earth to care for our souls and teach us the truth. In love for us, he even insisted on what the standards for those workers should be. God works through those imperfect sinners when they proclaim his gospel. Now he calls us today to hear his word and receive his ministers with joy. To love them and support them and if they are unfaithful, to remove them. But to do all according to his word. And to trust that he will continue to work through the gospel that he sends pastors and teachers to proclaim. Through that message, he will bring us all home to heaven. Amen.