

Letters From a Mentor—Part 1:  
“Look for the Bigger Picture”

Rev. Rob Carter  
OT 24C-19  
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1 Timothy 2: 1-7  
Luke 16: 1-13

Letters From a Mentor—Part 2:  
“Look for the Bigger Picture”

As we began exploring last week, 1 Timothy is one of just three letters in Scripture known as the “Pastorals.” The Apostle Paul—the guy who traveled the ancient Roman world to spread the Christian faith wherever he could—he purportedly wrote these letters not to the new Christian communities he helped establish. Rather, these are letters of pastoral advice and practical guidance sent as a mentor to his mentee—from one leader in the Church to an up and coming leader in the church.

Now, I reiterate that Paul *purportedly* wrote these letters because scholarship is divided over whether these letters actually came from Paul. Regardless, their place in Scripture offers precious bits of wisdom from one Christian disciple to another; they tell of lessons gained in pursuit of living faith more fully, and spreading God’s kingdom more broadly.

Which was crucial to this fledging Christian movement. Back then, the Church was just a baby living amid the giant Roman Empire and the longstanding Hebrew tradition—which only made things harder for those first Christian communities.

For it was clear to everyone—the Christians were the misfits. The Christians were the ones who didn’t fit into either Gentile, Roman world, or the traditional Hebrew world.

You and I... we don’t get mocked for coming to worship. We don’t get ridiculed for proclaiming faith in Jesus Christ. We don’t have family or friends calling us heretics for abandoning the faith of our ancestors.

But those first Christians did. They regularly faced both ridicule and persecution for their newfound faith.

It had to have been so tempting... just as it would’ve been much safer... for those first Christians to simply withdraw from society to live out their faith amid a secluded, insular community. They could’ve spared themselves a tremendous amount of hardship if they’d just treated the Gospel as if it were strictly a message of personal salvation rather than a kingdom to spread.

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Ironically, this is one of the greatest problems within the church today. As many Christians believe exactly this.

In a word, it’s called *reductionism*—reducing the Gospel of Jesus Christ from a big picture to a wee, little one. Reducing the kingdom of God from a movement to redeem the

world, to a mere act of personal salvation... as if the whole point of the Gospel is to believe in Jesus Christ in order to get into heaven when you die.

Now, I'm not saying the gospel doesn't offer personal salvation. I believe it does. Nor am I saying the love and grace of Jesus Christ aren't personal. They are—extremely personal.

But that's just one piece of the puzzle. The picture doesn't stop there. It can't. Because Scripture is clear. Jesus Christ came to reveal the grace and love of God's kingdom to a whole lot more than a few people here and a few people there. Just as Christ came to accomplish a whole lot more than getting people into heaven when they die.

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This temptation—to reduce the gospel into a mere personal message of salvation instead of good news for the whole world—it's why Paul wanted to make sure Timothy kept his eye on the bigger picture.

So he encouraged him, "Pray, Timothy. Pray for yourself and pray for the people you care for. But you also must pray for all the people around you... and the state of the world that surrounds you. You should even pray for the Roman leaders oppressing you... and the neighboring community members harassing you. *Because God loves them, too*, Timothy. God loves them and yearns that they might uncover the joy of living into God's love and grace just as you have.

"So remember," Paul said, "as tempting as it is to turn inward... as easy as it could be to shrink the Gospel from a universal message to a strictly personal one... as hard as it can be to offer compassion to the one you don't even know, let alone the one trying to do you harm... that is the call of those who would follow Jesus. For while God desires you to know how much God loves you, God also desires them to know the peace of life lived amid the assurance that God's grace will never let them go. So do not turn inward, Timothy. Keep you eye on the bigger picture God is asking you to help reveal."

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In our Gospel lesson, Jesus essentially tells his disciples the same thing... but in a much, much more confusing way.

He tells a parable about a manager who gets in trouble for mismanaging his boss's money. So before his boss has the chance to fire him, the manager plots to reduce the amount of debt that other people owe his boss. Now, it wasn't his debt to reduce. This is far from ethical behavior, right? But still, the manager does it hoping the people he helps out might turn around and help him out once he's fired.

It's a story of manipulation and deception... but Jesus seems to praise the manager. Or... rather... he praises the manager for acting "shrewdly."

Leaving you and me and Biblical readers for two millennia wondering... "Is this how disciples are called to behave? Shrewdly?"

"Are disciples supposed to live in a quid pro quo world—I'll scratch your back if... and only if you scratch mine?"

"Is the Gospel really about making sure you get yours before they get theirs?"

The parable certainly does read that way IF you don't read its concluding verses, where Jesus makes clear... the manager isn't praised for being conniving or manipulative. Rather, there's an important lesson to be learned from the manager's ability to *look at the bigger picture*. He knew he was about to get fired. But rather than simply sit around and wait for the inevitable, the manager understood that what he did today would directly impact the future.

He was looking at the bigger picture.

And just to make sure his disciples didn't misunderstand... Jesus drives the point home, saying, "No one can serve two masters. No one can serve two competing priorities. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Other translations read "You cannot serve God and mammon," a phrase I like a little better because mammon means more than just money. It means "selfish gain." It's the pursuit of more for yourself and only for yourself.

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So according to Jesus... we can pursue gain for ourselves... security... wealth... acclaim and accolades... We can seek the latest creature comforts for ourselves... gizmos and gadgets... a surplus of food and savings to ensure we've got ours. OR... or... we can serve something much bigger. Something far greater. Something beautiful and divine that will not only bless us but bless the world around us for generations to come.

But we can't have it both ways. We can't prioritize ourselves while also pursuing the kingdom God yearns for us to help create. We can't say God wants us to know joy while pretending God doesn't want the same for those in the throes of physical, economic, or emotional violence. We can't say God wants us to know the blessings of creation while not caring how our consumption affects the environment our grandchildren will inherit. We can't pretend the Gospel of love and grace is intended for us but that it's in any way acceptable to build a way to keep others out... or our blessings in.

*We can't serve God and mammon.*

As Paul tells Timothy, "Even when things get tough and the temptation is to turn inward... remember... God yearns not just for you to know the salvation of God's love. God yearns for the whole world to know God the truth of God's love."

So disciples of Christ... it seems to me:

- We can choose the ways of immediate gratification... Or we can choose the longer, inclusive path of understanding that there can't be peace for us until there is peace for all.
- We can choose to reduce the Gospel to simply a personal message just for us and those who agree with us ... Or we can pursue the much less popular but much more fulfilling path of living with love of God and neighbor as the core rubric for our lives.

But let's be clear. When we choose the smaller picture, the Gospel is reduced. When we seek the bigger picture... when we live for a reality that is bigger than us... we get to participate in nothing less than the installation of God's kingdom.

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I'll close with a story from a pastor named Tony Campolo—some of you may have heard of him. He's a vibrant preacher with a rich legacy. He's often invited all across the nation to serve as a guest preacher or speaker.

*At one such event—a huge mission rally—Tony was asked to lead the gathering in prayer. They asked him to pray for a missionary doctor they were supporting. The goal of the prayer? That God might provide the \$5,000 urgently needed for the medical center the doctor ran.*

*Seems like a perfectly faithful prayer, right? But Tony wouldn't do it. He refused to pray that prayer for God to provide a way for that money, because Tony knew God had already prepared the way. Instead, he said he'd only pray with the gathering after everyone in the room gave all the cash they had on them that day towards the fundraising goal.*

*The audience was stunned, but when Tony started emptying his own pockets they knew he was serious. After some hesitation everyone started following suit.*

*And you know what? By the end of the giving they had collected not \$5,000 but \$8,000! So the prayer of request they'd asked Tony to give turned into a glorious prayer of thanksgiving for what God made possible through them.<sup>1</sup>*

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Friends, the kingdom of God is here. It's around us and in us. But to see it, let alone live into it, we need to look for the bigger picture. The one that includes us but isn't about us. The one that blesses us by using us.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Campolo, credited to *Let Me Tell You A Story*, as found on <http://storiesforpreaching.com/>