

Guard the Good Deposit (2 Timothy 1:13-18)

Big Idea: Hold on to the truth against all the pressures to let it go.

It's called *el camino de la muerte*. Translated into English, that means "road of death." In 1995, the Inter-American Development Bank called it the "world's most dangerous road."

Found in Bolivia, this dirt and rock route stretches 69 kilometers, one lane, no guardrails. It's often engulfed in fog and, when it's muddy, it has zero traction. Plus you get falling rocks. If you get tired, there's no place to stop. If you meet an oncoming vehicle, you have to hope the road is wide enough to squeeze by, or one of you has to reverse until you find a spot wide enough for both cars to fit. The smaller error can send you down 800 meters to your death.

An average of 26 vehicles fall off this road each year; and 200 to 300 people lose their lives on it annually. On July 24, 1983, over 100 passengers were killed when a bus veered over the edge and crashed into a canyon. They say that at least a thousand people have died there.

But, despite the danger, the road has become an increasingly popular tourist attraction since the early 1990s.

Here's one of the lessons from the road: we tend to be attracted to danger. There are a lot of things that look really good to us that present a danger to our lives, and we just can't stay away.

Today we're going to look at one of them. There's an important message in this passage for us in this passage that we need to hear. In fact, our lives depend on it.

The Command

So what's the command? The command is given twice in two different ways in verses 13 and 14.

Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. (2 Timothy 1:13-14)

So what's the command?

The first is to follow the pattern of sound words that Timothy has heard from Paul. The word sound could literally be translated healthy. Timothy had hung around with Paul as Paul traveled around to plant churches. Over those years Timothy had heard Paul preach. He'd heard Paul teach healthy words. No doubt they'd spent time talking in private too over meals, discussing truth. And now Paul says: you've heard these healthy words from me. Now follow their pattern. Retain the truth in the face of false teachers who are going to push you away from that truth. Paul's words are a prototype, a pattern, and Timothy can't afford to deviate from them.

Notice that Paul isn't telling Timothy to become a theological nitpicking jerk. Some people love to pick fights. They love a good theological argument. But Paul says, "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, *in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*" Timothy is to follow the pattern of sound words he's heard from Paul, but he's to do so with the attitudes and actions of faith and love. We

think we have to choose between holding on to truth and being a person of faith and love, but Paul says we need both. We need to hold on to truth at the same time that you hold on to faith and love.

Just so that Timothy gets the point, Paul repeats it in verse 14. "By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you." The first command was to follow the pattern of healthy words. This command is to guard the good deposit against getting lost or damaged.

One of the infamous stories in our house is stopping at Webbers in Orillia on the way to Muskoka. We bought burgers and fries and sat outside at the picnic table. Near the end of the meal, Josiah had to go to the washroom and asked us to look after the remaining french fries until he returned. We got distracted, and when he returned he found a seagull eating the rest of his french fries while we were distracted. We didn't guard the deposit entrusted to us.

It's one thing to do this with french fries, even though we still haven't been forgiven for that. But the stakes are a lot higher when it comes to healthy teaching. We can't afford to get distracted and lose that. And that's what happens if we're not careful.

Look around and you realize it doesn't take long to lose what's been entrusted to us. It happens to people, and it happens to churches and organizations.

Take Harvard, for instance. Its original mission statement was "To be plainly instructed and consider well that the main end of your life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ." Founded in 1636, this university employed exclusively Christian professors, emphasized character formation in its students above all else, and placed a strong emphasis on equipping ministers to share the good news. Every diploma read, "Truth for Christ and the Church."

Only 80 years after its founding, it had drifted so far from its mission that a group of pastors decided to start a new school that could do better. The new school was called Yale, which also has moved from its original purpose.

But it's not just schools. It's churches. Toronto is littered with churches that got distracted and lost the good deposit entrusted to them. One generation believed the gospel; the second generation assumed the gospel; the following generation denied the gospel. It happens all around us.

Paul says to Timothy, and indirectly to us: Don't let it happen to you.

Why It's Important

Okay, why is this so important?

You have to admit that there's quite a bit of pressure to *not* make a big deal about potentially divisive issues. To be sure, there's a danger to drawing the lines too tightly, of becoming too rigid and exclusive. I love this story:

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

"Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over."

We don't want to be like that: to be sectarian and divisive. We can agree that unnecessary division harms the unity of the church and leads to pride. We want to avoid that.

But we face another danger, probably more prevalent today than being too narrow. The greatest danger most churches face today is doctrinal minimalism. People say, "Let's stop dividing over doctrine! It just hurts people. Let's just love Jesus and feed the poor." The dominant drive in churches that I see today is to reduce our focus to a small body of truths related to the gospel message and ignore everything else. But there's a cost to this. Precision matters in everything that's important, from the construction of your condo, to the dispensing of medication by your pharmacist, to our theology.

"When it comes to theology, the smallest of details often lead to the biggest of consequences," writes [Trevin Wax](#). "In theology, the minutia involved in debate—the small, seemingly insignificant details—really matter. At one point in Christian history, the thread of orthodoxy hung on the presence of one vowel in a word describing God the Father and God the Son." It was a small difference, but it's also the difference between heresy and truth. It makes all the difference in the world.

If you've been around here for a while, you know that we talk about theological triage – about distinguishing levels of theological urgency in areas of disagreement. Some truths are more crucial than others. It's a valuable tool, and we need to use it.

Gavin Ortlund divides them this way:

- First-rank doctrines are *essential* to the gospel. You really can't deny these teachings and still call yourself a Christian. These are so tied to the essentials of the faith that if you lose them, you lose everything. These are things like: "There is one God in three persons; Jesus is fully God and fully human; Jesus sacrificially died for sinners; Jesus rose bodily from the dead; we are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; Jesus is coming back" ([Andrew Naselli and J.D. Crowley](#)).
- Second-rank doctrines are *urgent* for the church (but not essential to the gospel). Christians may disagree on these items, although they will cause significant boundaries. These are still urgent, and include things like baptism, church government, spiritual gifts, and and the role of men and women in ministry. You don't have to hold a particular view to be a Christian, but it's challenging for a church to be unified if you disagree on these matters.
- Third-rank doctrines are *important* to Christian theology (but not essential to the gospel or necessarily urgent for the church) – things like our particular understanding of the end times, for instance, or the details of interpreting Genesis 1, or practical matters.
- Fourth-rank doctrines are *indifferent* (they are theologically unimportant). We may have different opinions on them, but they're not worth splitting over.

First rank issues are crucial. If we lose our belief in and trust in who Jesus is and what he's done for us, we lose everything. Trust in him today. Stake your life on the gospel. It's a hill worth dying on. It's right that we emphasize them.

But sometimes I worry that we settle for a kind of theological minimalism in which we don't care about anything but first order issues, and we don't wrestle with and submit to what Scripture says in every area. It's like we think that we should defend and proclaim first order issues, but go with the flow with the rest.

But listen to this:

A structure of theological triage does not imply that Christians may take any biblical truth with less than full seriousness. We are charged to embrace and to teach the comprehensive truthfulness of the Christian faith as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. There are no insignificant doctrines revealed in the Bible, but there is an essential foundation of truth that undergirds the entire system of biblical truth. ([Al Mohler](#)).

So here's what I suggest. I'm stealing it from Gavin Ortlund in his excellent book [Finding the Right Hills to Die On](#):

- With first rank issues, we need *courage* and *conviction*
- With second rank issues, we need *wisdom* and *balance* – to wisely navigate the practical and relational nuances
- With third rank issues, we need *forbearance* and *resilience* – a refusal to fight over these issues, even though we still see them as important to understand

Why are second and third order issues important, not just first-order issues? Why can't we just focus on first order issues and forget everything else? Because if Scripture is

God's Word, all of it matters. Every sentence. "Everything God reveals in Scripture is essential for something, or it wouldn't be there," writes Gavin Ortlund. "A casual, take-it-or-leave-it attitude about theology is totally incompatible with how we are to receive the word of God. Its contents may call for trembling and tearing of clothes, but never shrugging." Everything is practical. These issues matter for our souls and for how we live our lives.

My Plea

Okay, we're going to return to this next week and flesh this out a little more. But let me close today with a plea.

Some people are a little too punchy when it comes to truth. If that's you, you face a danger of making everything a first-order issue, of not showing charity to those who disagree on theological matters. Some people are too sectarian and ready to divide.

But I think we face another danger. One ancient theologian (Martin Luther) compared us to a drunken man on horseback, who, when propped up on one side, will tumble over the other. In avoiding theological controversy, we may end up on the other side of the horse in just as great a danger. When Paul pens his last words, he warns us against the danger of not holding on to the truth we've received.

[Matthew Kruse](#), a pastor in Boston, imagines gathering his team around a whiteboard to list the threats to his church. The list is a long one:

- Rapidly secularizing culture
- General populous uninterested in Christianity
- Sunday is the new Saturday

- Growing hostility to religious freedoms
- Super high cost of living in greater Boston
- Obscene transience
- Proliferation of other gospel-centered churches nearby
- No endowment, rental income, or benefactor
- Potential changes to the tax code
- Aging lead pastor
- Zero dedicated parking spaces

Add to that now the COVID-19 crisis.

But then he says this:

While these are all legitimate threats to be noted and addressed ... The greatest threat to the health of Jesus's church is never financial, relational, cultural, or demographical. It is always theological. It is always someone poisoning the spring of gospel truth with lies that wreak havoc downstream in the lives of the people.

He then says a better list of threats would look like this:

- Legalism
- Antinomianism
- Narcissism
- Secularism
- Modernism
- Postmodernism
- Universalism
- Feminism

- Prosperity gospel
- Therapeutic gospel
- Social gospel
- Any gospel contrary to the one we received

Truth matters. Not just truth about the gospel, although that matters most, but all truth that God has revealed.

Paul says to follow the pattern of sound doctrine, to refuse to get distracted and lose the good deposit entrusted to us. There's a lot at stake. Don't fall into the sectarian trap, but don't fall into the doctrinal minimalist camp either. It takes a lot of wisdom to search for God's truth, to take his Word seriously, to triage what's important, and to hold on to truth against all the pressures that try to persuade you to cave.

I began this sermon by talking about the dangers of the road of death. Paul writes his last words to Timothy, and encourages him to hold on to the truth, because there's a lot at stake if he lets go.

Hold on to the truth against all the pressures to let it go. It matters. Paul was in prison because of that truth. He was about to die for that truth. That truth has been revealed by God himself through his Word. It matters for the living of your life. These truths are, as Paul says, sound words, words of health.

But take all of God's truth seriously. Don't be flippant with any of God's truth.

Father, don't let us become sectarian. Don't let us become divisive or combative.

But please also help us avoid the trajectory of our culture, particularly among younger generations, toward doctrinal minimalism and indifference. May we work with all our hearts and minds to follow the pattern of the sound words that we have heard, and to guard the good deposit entrusted to us. In the name of Jesus. Amen.