

The Servant of the Lord is Called 2) To Hold to Scripture

2 Thess. 2:13-17 • 2021-01-17 • Series for Epiphany



In 1705 a dollmaker in London finished building a dollhouse and doll set. Soon it was purchased by a family who gave it to their daughter. The family treasured it so much that the dollhouse was passed on generation after generation in the family for hundreds of years. In 1840 a Navajo woman living in America's southwest finished a blanket she had woven by hand. A tradesman bought it and it ended up in a family keeping a man and his wife warm during cold nights. That blanket was carefully passed on to their children. In 1899 a father bought his son a pack of cards with pictures of baseball players. It was one of the first official sets of cards. His son treasured them and eventually gave them to his own son. They were passed on and held onto for decades. What sort of treasures have you received or passed on to others? The apostle Paul talks about the importance of holding onto what is passed on to us. But he's not talking about toys, blankets, or cards, he is talking about the faith passed on to us by word or letter. How is that done? We find out as we look at the second letter to the Thessalonians. Today we continue our series, "The Servant of the Lord is Called." We will see how as servants of the Lord we are called to hold onto what was passed on to us.

The Thessalonian Christians were given an incredible gift. They had been worshipping idols, but by the mercy and grace of God they were now a part of the family of God. Paul, Silas, and Timothy write to them calling them "brothers." They had been brought from certain death and condemnation under the wrath of God as idol worshippers to experiencing the love of the Lord. They had been given the gift of faith in Jesus.

It can be easy for us to forget that faith is a gift of God. Instead of looking to God we like to look at ourselves. We may at times be tempted to think we have earned our salvation. We might, in pride, begin to think that we are on God's team because we are one of the best runners and he needs us. But that is not the case at all. In great humility we must acknowledge that every part of our salvation is a gift -including our conversion to faith. The letter to the Thessalonians doesn't read, "We thank you for believing our message. You chose the right God." Instead, it gives the credit to God. He gave the gift of salvation and caused the conversion of the believers in ancient Thessalonica. *"We are always obligated to thank God for you, brothers, loved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning for salvation."*

God is the one to thank when anyone is brought to faith in Jesus. We did not choose him. He chose us! That is an unpopular idea in many Christian circles. Many like to claim that faith is merely an act of the human will to choose right from wrong. But that would be impossible. We cannot choose to love and trust in our God. By nature, we are dead in sin, enemies of God, and can only choose to reject him. Without God choosing us, we remain forever spiritually dead, his enemies, and working out evil. *"For the mind-set of the sinful flesh is hostile to God, since it does not submit to God's law, and in fact, it cannot. Those who are in the sinful flesh cannot please God."* (Ro 8:7-8)

The good news is that we can thank God for choosing us. He chose us who were born his enemies and who would never choose to love him. We were never part of that decision process. *"God chose you from the beginning for salvation."* Yes. I understand that many Christians will proudly say, "I chose Jesus," when talking about their conversion. And I wouldn't question on the basis of that statement whether they truly are saved or not. But I would join Paul, Silas, and Timothy in removing the emphasis on self and putting it where it belongs. Give the thanks and credit to God who chose us even before the beginning of the world! Our election from eternity is a comforting truth. God had a plan to save you. Your salvation is not a mere coincidence. It is the eternal plan of God. Thanks to God!

Consider what God's choice meant for you. *"God chose you for salvation by the sanctifying work of the Spirit and faith in the truth."* The Holy Spirit set us apart from the unbelieving world and the Spirit led us to faith in the truth. Since we were chosen by God, we were called by him to faith. *"For this reason, he also called you..."* Conversion is not the result of human reasoning or intellect. It is not the result of some hidden spark of good inside us. Our conversion is the result of God's calling. Any other human-centered picture of conversion is robbing glory from God who did all the work.

"He called you through the gospel." When the gospel came to you in Word and Sacrament it was God's call to faith in the truth. The gospel is a precious gift by which God calls people to faith!

And with faith comes the end goal of our salvation. *"...So that you would obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."* Brothers and sisters, loved by God, chosen by him, and called to faith in him, you have been chosen and called to a glorious salvation. Through the gospel God has brought you from the place of darkest despair living as his enemy and dying under his judgment to obtaining glory with our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is all obtained with the gift of the gospel! The gospel proclaims Jesus as our Lord. He is the one who made all things and through whom all things exist. But the gospel also proclaims that Jesus is the Christ. That is a word which means "Anointed one" or "Chosen one." Perhaps you are familiar with the popular streaming video series by that title. Jesus was chosen from the beginning to bring us the gift of glory.

To understand the gospel passed on to us, we have to understand what the first people chose. They chose to reject God's love and they lost the glory he had given them. And when they chose to disobey their Creator they were cast out from his glorious presence. They deserved nothing but God's holy and just sentence of death and punishment.

But the gospel came. And with that good news they learned the amazing truth that God would pay the price for their sins. He promised to set them free from its curse and condemnation. We did not have to pay the cost of sin because God chose to pay it for us. In order to give us glory, the Son of God gave up his glory. He lowered himself and became fully human. The chosen one took our place. He took our curse and our death -which we rightly deserved for loving and choosing rebellion and evil. And he promised us the gift of a glorious eternal life. It is a promise which gives us new life. We believe the promise is good because Jesus Christ rose again from the grave in victory. The glory which Jesus now enjoys as a living and resurrected Savior is good news for us. Through faith in the truth of the gospel we will share in his glory. We will live forever because God chose us for salvation!

All this is ours as we have been called to faith by the work of the Spirit and his calling through the gospel! We have been handed a tremendous gift with the gift of the gospel! For many of us the gospel was passed on by parents. For some it was passed on by friends or a Christian mentor or teacher. It doesn't matter when or how it was passed on. Today if it is by email, phone, in person, a text, or video chat it is a priceless gift to receive the gospel.

What should we do now that we've had this passed on to us? *"So then, brothers, stand firm and hold on to the teachings that were passed along to you, either by word of mouth or by a letter from us."* We have been called to glory through the gospel. Now we are told to hold onto what we have received. Stand firm in the faith you were given. Now that God has called us to faith, we do have a choice. What will you do with what was passed on to you?

Have you ever had a precious family heirloom passed on to you? The British version of antiques Roadshow once featured a doll house set. For many generations, the dollhouse was passed on from family to family. When one family finally sought to learn the value of the dollhouse, they took it in for an appraisal. It turned out that the dollhouse and the figures with it were from 1705. Because it had been so well preserved and held onto for generations it was appraised for more worth than what most people pay for a home. There's another story about a man who was dirt poor after losing his leg in a car accident. But when he saw an old Navajo quilt appraised on Antiques Roadshow, he realized he had inherited one just like it from his grandmother. His was from 1840 and he ended up selling it for 1.5 million dollars. Another story mentions a family that nearly tossed out a brown paper bag left in their grandfather's attic. It turned out to contain century-old baseball cards which were worth over a million dollars. None of these would have ever had those gifts unless it was passed on and someone held onto it as a treasure. What we have received from God is the gospel, the greatest treasure which brings us to eternal life through faith in Jesus. It is beyond price and through it we obtain glory.

Today you could argue that the gospel has been passed on in so many ways that it can be easy to miss the tremendous value of it. It is as if every Christian family has the same dollhouse, the same 1840 Navajo blanket, the same cards. So many believers have copies of the Bible that they might even be hard pressed to tell you where each one is.

But holding onto the Scriptures doesn't mean literally setting it in a display case to admire. It means taking out the dolls to play with them, wrapping yourself in the warm blanket, and looking over the trade cards for fun. Holding onto the gospel means using it and treasuring it as a gift. And please don't misunderstand. Paul isn't talking about merely holding onto traditional values here. Holding onto the gospel doesn't mean keeping the box and wrapping paper that the gift came in. Holding onto the gospel doesn't mean simply holding to a traditional style of words, decorations, vestments, or a single type of music. It means living by the truth and meditating on it. It means daily letting what was passed on to you take on life in your heart as the living word of God.

How well have you held onto what was passed on to you? Has regular Bible reading become something you only do when you have the time? Or is it something you'd never let go of? Are the teachings you might have learned in confirmation class something you've set aside, or do you still regularly gather with fellow believers for Bible study? "Hold on, stand firm" can too easily become, "I've got that book around here somewhere, I think."

In 2008 four of the fastest men in America lined up for the Olympic relay event. The US men's team always advanced from the first round to the finals. They did it every year since 1912 without fail. But not in 2008. That year the baton was dropped, and the team lost the race. Remarkably, the US women's 400-meter relay team made the same mistake that same year. Because one runner failed to hold on to the baton, they lost out. Don't drop the baton passed to you.

Brothers, loved by the Lord, I thank God that he called you. I ought to thank him also for choosing and calling me. None of us deserved such a treasured gift that brings us glory. With such a precious gift passed onto us, how could we ever stop standing firm or holding onto what we have received? Don't let the gospel become expendable.

Join me and the saints before us who passed on such a treasure to us as we pray, *"May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and, in his grace, gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and establish you in every good work and word."* Servants of the Lord, you have been called to faith in Jesus and look forward to obtaining the full glory he has promised. Hold onto the gospel.