

NEW TESTAMENT PERSONALITIES

"VI. Timothy"

INTRODUCTION

We come today to the last sermon in a series of six sermons all of which have been cast in something of the same form, all of which have been based on personalities of the New Testament. Today's sermon is about a young man. His name is Timothy.

If Jesus had his beloved disciple in John, so Paul had his beloved disciple in Timothy. The friendship between these two men takes its place in any listing of the great friendships of history: David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, Luther and Melancthon, Tennyson and Hallam - Paul and Timothy.

BACKGROUND

Timothy was probably still a teen-ager when Paul came to Lystra in the course of his first missionary journey. The boy was the son of a mixed marriage - his father a Greek, his mother a Jew. We have no details about his conversion. The only hint that we have is in Paul's comment that the mother, Eunice, and the grandmother, Lois, were converted first. I wonder if an enthusiastic mother persuaded a reluctant son to go with a group of his friends to the edge of the crowd where Paul and Barnabas were the center with their powerful preaching about Jesus Christ. We do not know just how it happened; we only know that it did happen - and Timothy became a Christian. "A Christian" says Theodore Parker Ferris, "is a person who is drawn to Jesus Christ, and being drawn to Him, believes in Him, and believing begins to behave like Him". That was Timothy.

There must have been times during Paul's first stay in Lystra when the Apostle and the apprentice talked together. Did Timothy's Greek father give him a difficult time at home in arguments about the faith? Did some of Timothy's erstwhile friends sneer at the changes in his life that his conversion had made? ~~So did a very young and very inexperienced Christian seek the counsel of the man whose witness by word and deed had been so largely responsible for his adventure in discipleship.~~

At any rate, Timothy must have impressed Paul, for two years later, at the start of Paul's second missionary journey, as he returned to Lystra, Paul must have sought out Timothy and said, "I want you on my team that travels. Can you be ready to leave with us the day after tomorrow?" Do you suppose Timothy blinked his eyes and caught his breath and said, "Are you sure you've got the right man? Look, I'm not even out of my teens. There's Deacon Sylvanus over there who is twice my age and three times my stature in this community. Maybe he's your man". "No" said Paul. "You're the man I want. I need you".

And so Paul ordained Timothy to the ministry, and from that day on the Younger man was to share with the older man the troubles and the triumphs, the depths and the heights of that first century Christian leadership. Sometimes they traveled together as a team. More often, Timothy handled special assignments at Paul's request, visiting the churches in Corinth and Ephesus and Thessalonica. Through it all, you sense a bond of complete trust and understanding

between these two men. "My beloved son"....Paul calls Timothy in his letters.

Especially in the New Testament epistles which bear the name of Timothy, you can measure the esteem of the older man for the younger man. Here is a kind of last will and testament in which the aging apostle leaves his mantel to the junior member of the firm. Paul recalls that day, maybe fifteen years before, when he had ordained a young man into the ministry, and he recounts his satisfaction at the progress of the partnership. He knows that now, "the day of departure has come". He feels that he has "fought the good fight.....finished the race". He commends himself to God's ongoing faithfulness, and he commends the Christian movement to Timothy's leadership, under God's guidance. "~~I commit to you Timothy; my son, that you may wage the good warfare.~~"

There is a tradition that Timothy later returned to Ephesus and became the first bishop of the church there. It does not greatly matter what position he may have occupied later in life. The important thing is that he was a vital link in "that endless line of splendor" between Calvary's hill and our own lives. One day a teenager in Lystra was drawn to Christ and soon became a partner of Paul; one day, some years later, the same Paul bequeathed to the same youth a significant share of the leadership of the Christian expansion in the first century.

CONFIDENCE IN YOUNG PEOPLE

There are two observations suggested by the account of the partnership between Paul and Timothy. First, this is a story about an older person who placed great confidence in a young person. If Lystra was like any other town in any other place and age, I'll venture that there were murmurs of disapproval when Paul commissioned one so young and inexperienced as his lieutenant. Surely some people shook their heads and said such things as, "He's altogether too young. He doesn't know what it's all about. He just sees the adventure in it. Timothy belongs to this mixed-up younger generation. Why did you hear about that riot over in Iconium over the holiday weekend. Now mind you, I didn't say Timothy was involved in that, but that's the way most young people are now a days. I don't understand Paul....choosing a boy like Timothy for a man-sized job".

At least, this is pretty much what one generation has been saying about a succeeding generation since the beginning of time. The Old Testament tells us that when Goliath first saw David, "He disdained him, for he was but a youth". Not because of his size, mind you, but because of his youth. So it has ever been. The giants of one generation tend to disdain the youthful challengers of the next generation. And when in the first century, Paul wrote to Timothy telling him not to let people look down on him because he was young, there is the implication that again some oldsters had expressed their disdain for a youth.

Still today, young people often feel discriminated against simply because they are young. You can hear them saying it in some of their songs, for every generation has its "too young" songs.

You can hear some of them saying it in their weariness with the phrase, "teen age delinquency"...which tends to equate all teenagers with lawlessness. You can hear some of them saying it in rebellion against any church or community or culture that barely tolerates youth without really trying to welcome and listen.

And I suppose some of that resentment is justified. Why is it as parents we often tend to forget our own actions and reactions when we were teenagers. Why is it that so many deacons and dominies have been more interested in the finish on the floor and the growth of the grass than the richest development of the young people within a church? Why is it that older people so often dismiss the questions and ideals of younger people with an impatient, "They'll get over it..."

"Don't let people look down on you because you are young"... Paul advised Timothy. In one sense, our world hardly seems to need that advice. For in many ways, this is a young person's world. A youth of promise finds the doors swinging open to him - in education, in business, in science, in organized athletics. Sometimes it appears that Paul's advice needs to be revised. "Don't let people look down on you because you are old".

On the other hand, however, there is also that way in which Paul's advice, unrevised, is timeless. "Let no one despise your youth". There's a word of caution there for all of us who are older in its reminder that all around us young people are going through pretty much the same battles that we went through in the struggle toward an independent self-hood, and that often they need nothing so much as someone who will listen, someone who will understand, someone who will trust.

Kenneth Eaton, in a sermon in "The Pulpit" quoted from a letter written by a so-called delinquent boy to his parents. The parents sent it to "The Kansas City Star" saying, "Maybe if we share this letter, it will help other parents". Let me read you several parts of the letter. (read letter)

A youth in the first century found that need answered, presumably in the home, and then in a great friendship. The friend earned the right to say, "Don't let people look down on you because you are young".

THE YOUTH RESPONDED

But now we need to look at the picture of the friendship between Paul and Timothy from another angle and realize that this is not only the story of an older man who placed great confidence in a youth: it is also the story of a youth who responded to the trust that was placed in him. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Don't let people look down on you because you are young", and then he went on to say, "See that they look up to you because you are an example to them in your speech and behavior, in your love and faith and sincerity".

If what we have been saying up to this point applies largely to older people, then what we are saying now applies largely to

youth. It is one thing to ask people to trust you. It is quite another thing to demonstrate that the trust has not been misplaced. This was the great thing about Timothy. Like his youthful counterpart in every generation, he said, "Treat me as a grown up". And he proceeded to prove that he was really grown up.

I think part of our problem rests in an understanding of what we mean by being "grown up". So often we attach superficial meanings to that phrase. A friend of mine recently commented that for most young people today the supreme symbol of maturity is the acquisition of a license to drive an automobile. My friend pointed out that this particular milestone had all but replaced in significance the Bar Mizvah of the Jewish faith, or even the achievement of voting age as the sign of initiation into adulthood. Granted the exciting significance of the attainment of a driver's license and I remember the day I received mine and what it did for me. Yet a person is not automatically grown up because the state grants him permission to drive a car. Too many children get behind the driver's wheel - some aged eighteen, some aged forty-five, some aged seventy-five. Just so, a person is not necessarily grown-up because he drives or because he dates or because he is in high-school or college.

I think the Apostle Paul did some serious thinking about what it means to grow up. He said, "When I was a child, I acted like a child....when I became a man, I gave up childish things". In another place he says, "We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Jesus Christ". He understood that real maturity is not so much a matter of age as of actions, not so much a matter of bodily growth, as of spiritual growth.

When a person really grows up, he grows out of self-centeredness into a sensitivity to others' needs; he grows out of unpredictability into a dependability of word and deed. He grows from conformity into conviction. He grows from an obsession with pleasure into a concern with purpose. Both young people and adults need to be reminded of this from time to time. Freedom and responsibility are both sides of the same coin - the whole of which is maturity.

With the first part of Paul's advice to Timothy, every young person will be in glad agreement: "Don't let people look down on you because you are young". Yes, but go on with the rest of his advice: "See that they look up to you because you are an example to them in your speech, your behavior - your love, faith and sincerity."

PRAYER: We are thankful, Our Father, for the lives of those who have gone before us marking the way, setting the example. May that spirit that was in thy servant, Timothy, be also in us that we in our lives, daily, may set an example of Christian character to all we meet along the way. We ask this in the spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen

Dear Folks,

Thank you for everything, but I am going to Chicago and try to start some kind of new life.

You asked me why I did those things and why I gave you so much trouble and the answer is easy for me to give you, but I wonder if you will understand.

Remember when I was about six or seven and I used to want you to listen to me? I just wanted all the time for you to listen to me like I was somebody who felt things, too, because I remember even when I was young I felt things. But you said you were busy.

Mom, you are a wonderful cook, and you had everything so clean and you were tired so much from doing all those things that made you busy; but you know something, Mom? I would have liked crackers and peanut butter just as well....if you had only sat down and said to me, "Tell me all about it so I can maybe help you understand!"

I think that all the kids who are doing so many things that grown ups are tearing out their hair worrying about are really looking for somebody that will have time to listen a few minutes and who really and truly will treat them as they would a grown up who might be useful to them.....

If...anybody asks you where I am, tell them I've gone looking for somebody with time because I've a lot of things I want to talk about"