

Unneglected Gifts

1 Timothy 4:1-16

Every so often, I'll look in a desk drawer and find one. I'll find a piece of candy left over from last Halloween. I'll find a gift card left over from last Christmas. I'll find something that was given to me as a thoughtful gift. Instead, though, I put it away and forgot about it. I neglected the gifts.

Kids do it all the time. They spend days, weeks, months leading up to a holiday demanding something that they want. Yet once they get it, they play with it for a bit, and then it starts gathering dust. The cycle repeats itself. Gifts get played with, then ignored.

Of course, we don't just do that with physical gifts. We do that with other gifts, as well. Maybe you have a musical instrument gathering dust. Maybe you have a paint brush, or some knitting needles that you haven't picked up for a while.

Today, Paul reminds Timothy of the gifts that he has. He reminds Timothy to keep the gifts of God, the ways that God promises to be with His people, in the forefront of his mind and ministry. He is to focus on the public reading of Scripture, exhortation, and teaching.

What happens when we neglect those gifts? The beginning of the chapter reminds us. "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared. (1 Timothy 4:1-2)." It seems as though in our day many churches have drifted in what they teach about church, family, and social issues. We ignore the teachings warning us against pride and greed. We ignore the teachings telling us to love our neighbors and love our enemies. So, how do we

know what is the truth when it comes to the plethora of issues where we have to decide what's right and what's wrong?

The first question to ask is, "What does the Bible say?" Sometimes the Bible is quite clear on the issues of our day and yet people will do gymnastics with Scripture in order to use the Bible to defend their position. Take for instance the question as to whether there are many ways to heaven. Jesus made it clear when He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," that there were not many ways to heaven, but one way. If you neglect the gift of the Bible, and what it says, and what you have learned, it's easier for you to be led astray.

A new study of the beliefs of evangelicals shows an alarming level of theological illiteracy. Ligonier Ministries, founded by the late Reformed theologian R. C. Sproul, has partnered with the Southern Baptist research organization Lifeway to study the State of Theology among American evangelicals. Keep in mind that this study is of evangelical Christians, which Lifeway defines as people who strongly agree with the following statements:

The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.

It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.

Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.

Nevertheless, here is what the State of Theology study found:
64% of evangelicals believe that “Everyone is born innocent in the eyes of God.”
53% affirm that “Everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature.”
53% believe that the Holy Spirit is a force but is not a personal being.
47% believe that “God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.”

When we neglect the gifts God has given us, we can get led astray. I mentioned a couple weeks ago, but it bears repeating. 90% of Americans have at least one copy of the Bible in their homes, but only 11% read the Bible daily. A great gift from God, to be able to have such easy access to the Bible, and yet we neglect such a gift. And when we do so, we can be misled. We can make ourselves little sinners, but that only means we need a little savior. But we are great sinners, and so we need a great savior. And in Jesus, that’s what we have.

Focus your attention. Keep the first thing the first thing. Pastor Ted Kober worked for a group called Ambassadors for Reconciliation, that worked with churches in conflict. Ted Kober’s recent book *Built on a Rock* indicates that increased participation in Bible study correlates with a decrease of congregational conflict. A recent study done by the American Bible Society found that increased engagement with Scripture correlated with stronger financial giving. Other studies show decreases in loneliness, anger, and bitterness with more engagement in Scripture, and increases in confidence in sharing your faith and helping others grow in their faith.

If you want your students to focus on what is written on the blackboard, focus on that blackboard with them. A good teacher knows

the unspoken rule: a student's attention will naturally follow the teacher's own. Moreover, that also works for our lives of faith and service. That’s why Paul wants Timothy to focus on those gifts, the public reading of Scripture, exhortation, and teaching.

While we may easily be tempted to focus on those whom we serve, our best modeling is to follow Jesus' lead. He always looked to God and invites us to do the same. Whether at work, raising children or ministering to others, Jesus invites us to look to him. What a gift we are given when we follow that example.

CS Lewis reminds us that we often forget about how wonderful the gifts of God are, and how they’re beyond what we expect. “Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

Do not neglect the gift you were given. You may not have had hands laid on you, but you were anointed. You were set apart. You were called by God to be a part of His family in your baptism. At the beginning of the school year, like we do at the beginning of every semester, we reaffirmed our vocations. We said these words:

In Holy Baptism, you died with Christ Jesus to the forces of evil and rose to new life as members of His body. As we begin this academic year, will you endeavor to be faithful to our Lord Jesus through service, worship, and

personal prayer? And will you strive to recognize the gifts that God has given you and discern how they may be used in the building of God's reign of peace and justice?

Paul warns Timothy not to neglect the gifts he's received. Timothy received a gift when they laid hands on him and installed him. You received a gift in your baptism, the gift of eternal life in Jesus and membership in God's family.

We all have been given gifts from God. "As each has received a gift, use it" (1 Peter 4:10). "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them" (Romans 12:6). Not only preaching and teaching but serving and giving, helping and healing, leading and administering are gifts "empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills" (1 Corinthians 12:11).

Why do we neglect the gifts? A few reasons. Sometimes we neglect our gifts because of sin: we don't feel worthy to use our gifts in the service of God because of our failings. Sometimes we neglect them due to false humility: We don't want to use our gifts to build ourselves up. Sometimes we neglect them due to impatience – We don't want to take the time to let our gifts mature.

We begin our stewardship emphasis today, which will continue over the next few weeks. We begin with the stewardship survey, which lists many of the ways you can use your gifts around church. As we think about how we've been blessed, as you think of the gifts of time, treasure, and talent you have, you can think of ways you can serve God, the church, your neighbor, and/or the community.

Faith begins with family devotions and bedtime prayers. And faith begins when children follow

their parents' example. When you drop off your kids at Sunday school, stay for adult Bible class so your children know that you value God's Word. After you finish confirmation or New Member Class, don't let your Bible or Catechism get dusty. Instead keep reading, so the gift of faith that God has given you will keep on burning! When you come to church on Sunday, praising God and hearing his Word, don't remain silent or keep it to yourself the rest of the week. Rather live out your faith and share it with someone else who doesn't know Jesus yet. Help them to hear the Word of Christ and receive it by faith.

"How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?" the Psalmist asks (Psalm 116:12). The answer: You can't! You can't out-give God because he loves to bless you. And the greatest gift of all is Jesus Christ.

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