

TO MY SON

An Expositional Study of II Timothy

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CHAPTER FOUR -

FIDELITY AND FALSITY

II Timothy 1:13-18

13 Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.

14 That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us.

15 This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me: of whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes.

16 The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus: for he oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain:

17 But, when he was in Rome, he sought me out very diligently, and found me.

18 The Lord grant unto him that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day: and in how many things he ministered unto me at Ephesus, thou knowest very well.

WHEREVER we go, even in professedly Christian circles, we find the faithful and the faithless. Even the Twelve were not as faithful as they might have been, and one of them was utterly false. So, however exalted the position we have attained, how ever advanced our progress in Christian knowledge and experience, we shall consider our passage with real humility, lest we are, or should become, involved in its implied strictures. Let us prayerfully study the verses along three lines.

And first:

THE EXPRESSION OF THE IDEAL

The apostle speaks of:

(a) "**The form of sound words.**" What does he mean by this (i) "**Form**"? Some see in it an allusion to some very early rudimentary Creed; perhaps a Baptismal Creed; and it may be so. What we know as the Apostles Creed was, of course, not in existence until a hundred years or so

later - A.D. 165. Since that early time this Form of Belief has been recited by the Church through the world, and I am bound to say that I am often thrilled, as I recite it, by the reflection that the saints of GOD in their myriads have "confessed" it in almost the very same "form".

Some Christians greatly deplore having a formal Creed at all. I cannot understand why; especially as not a few of them quite cheerfully sign a Basis of Belief in connection with some body of Christians to which they belong. I quite fail to see what is the difference between a Creed and a Basis.

But let that pass; for there seems no certainty that Paul was referring to a Creed at all. The word "**form**," carries the thought of a "*pattern*,"; and Dr. Handley Moule's rendering is "model". Probably we shall be on safe ground if we hold merely that it was an Outline, or Summary, of Christian Doctrine.

Anyhow they were (ii) "**Sound words**." This idea of sound words, or sound doctrine, is found only in these Pastoral Epistles - and is there six times. The adjective does not mean "*orthodox*," as we sometimes employ the word, saying that a man is (or, more usually, is not) "**sound**"; And don't let us belittle the importance of this soundness of orthodoxy, as some are inclined to do - even ridiculing it.

Paul would be the very last man to allow us to think lightly of this quality; the prevailing flaccidity of belief would, I suspect, be anathema to him. A body without bones would be a useless, and an unbecoming, thing. We don't want to be only bones; but we can't do without bones. Doctrine is bones; and it is well to see that they are not deformed - that is, that the doctrine is orthodox. "**Sound**" however, in this place means healthy, health-giving-ministering! as these "words" do, to the spiritual well-being of believers.

Paul now continues (b) "**which thou hast heard of me**". As any wise and loving parent will take care with the instruction of the child, so has this Father been at pains to teach, and to train, his Son in the faith. Knowing the essential importance of imparting true doctrine, he has taken every opportunity that presented itself to convey to his young pupil, in "**sound words**", the truths by which he lives.

Is it not true to say that if we have a real grasp and grip of "**sound words**", we shall be little likely to be beguiled, and misled, by unsound words? Is not the best protection against the infectious "-isms" of our day to be saturated with the disinfectant qualities of the Sound Word?

So we are exhorted to (c) "**Hold fast**". Because we may be so greatly tempted to grow false to the Truth, we are urged to continue faithful to it - holding it fast, as it holds us fast.

Hebrews 2:1 tells us that "**we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip**". Fidelity to the Truth, as to the Lord, is something that Satan hates; and he will tirelessly attempt to seduce all loyal adherents.

He will tell them that it is (i) Old fashioned - a thing from which we all are inclined to shrink: we just loathe being, or being thought to be, old-fashioned, whether in dress or in opinions. We are all for anything new fangled; and yet, when you come to think of it, are not the best things in life

the old-fashioned things? The sun that drove before it this morning's enveloping fog, the very air you breathe, the miracle of mother-love in the world of nature and in the human family: as old-fashioned as can be!

And I am not going to loosen my hold on my faith about GOD and His things because it is old - of course it is; that is just what I should expect.

Another ruse of the enemy is to tell us that those who think this way are (ii) A minority - and we do so like to be on the popular side. We talked a little about this in an earlier study; and we saw no reason to be either ashamed or afraid of being with the few, provided we are assured of the Truth.

But a warning is necessary at this point. that we should "**hold fast**" the Truth, and "hold forth" the Truth. (d) "**In faith and love**".

That is to say, that it shall be (i) *Not just formal - rigidly correct*. When we confess the words, the "I believe. . ." of the Creed, do we really believe? Is it just an intellectual acceptance of the traditional formula; or have we true vital faith in what we declare? Do we, in practical truth, rely on the Fatherhood of the FATHER, on the Saviourhood of the Saviour, and on the Companionhood of the Spirit?

Moreover, it shall be (ii) *Not just cold - frigidly correct*. We are to hold it fast, in love; the Truth evoking all the warm affection of our hearts. And we are to hold it forth, in love; proclaiming the Truth, not in a hard and harsh manner, but with a real heart concern that the hearer may be wooed and won by the beauty and wonder of the Truth itself - yea, of the True One Himself. It is, alas, all too possible to present the message in a self-righteous, and forbidding, way; and some of us have got to be on our guard about this. Ephesians 4:15 reminds us about "**speaking the truth in love**" - love for the Truth, love for the One Who is the Truth, love for the one who needs the Truth. Let us, by all means, have Fidelity to the Truth, but let us see that it is radiated by the right spirit.

This spirit is that (e) "**which is in CHRIST JESUS**".

Namely (i) As seen in Him. His ministry was ever exercised in faith and love; and those who would have Him for an example will take note of the kindly way in which He works and teaches. Even in necessary controversy, His aim is not to win points, but to win souls. There are occasions when it is our plain duty to enter upon controversy for the Truth: then must we be especially prayerful that the way we do it may be His way - in the loving spirit (ii) as gotten from Him.

He is ever the inexhaustible reservoir of every spiritual quality that His people may need; and the HOLY SPIRIT will unfailingly minister the supplies to those who trust and obey.

So, as taught by that same HOLY SPIRIT, Paul unfolds for Timothy the expression of the ideal; and he backs up his teaching by an outstanding example of this Fidelity that he urges: - a fidelity to the Lord which is reflected in fidelity to His servant. He instances Onesiphorus, a man well-known to Timothy. He recalls his Love, at Ephesus - "**in how many things he ministered unto**

me at Ephesus, thou knowest very well": the force of the comparative degree in the Greek here would seem to be. "thou knowest better than I". Some of Onesiphorus' kindness reached Paul anonymously; perhaps Paul was unaware of the source of the gifts, but Timothy knew better. He was quite well cognisant of their origin. Paul also recalls his Loyalty in Rome - he **"was not ashamed of my chain: but, when he was in Rome: he sought me out very diligently and found me"**.

Onesiphorus was not just a fairweather friend, who at first onset of trouble deserted him, ashamed to know a shackled prisoner marched through the streets like any low felon. Happening shortly after to go to Rome on business, he searched the place for Paul's dungeon, until he eventually found him. Here was a fine fidelity which might well be an ideal for Timothy, if ever he should be tempted to be False. Dr. Albert MacKinnon, in his truly fascinating book, *The Rome of Saint Paul* (p. 207 ff.), has a grand picture of this man. He thinks he went specially to Rome to find Paul, and extolling the sheer courage of the journey at such a time of suspicion and persecution, says "He went to Rome at a time when every Christian was trying to get out of it." The slightly peculiar language used here suggests:

(i) *His absence* - evidently he is not at the moment with Paul in Rome, for it says **"when he was in Rome"**; and it seems equally clear that he was not in Ephesus, whither Paul's letter was to travel, for reference is made, in verse 16, to - **"the house of Onesiphorus,"** and in 4:19, to **"the household of Onesiphorus"**, without, in that connection, including the man himself, while - in our verse - he has a mention all to himself.

Many scholars go further, and think that all this argues:

(ii) *His decease* - they may be right; but we venture to consider that the implication of the language is sufficiently satisfied by his absence, for the present, from either of the two places with which this letter is specially concerned - the place of the Epistle's departure, or destination. If Onesiphorus really were dead, some think that verse 18, **"the Lord grant unto him that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day"**, gives us warrant for Prayers for the Dead. Yet surely the form of the sentence gives us, not a prayer, but merely a pious wish. It seems to me a very flimsy foundation on which to build such a practice and doctrine.

The precarious nature of the structure is further suspected when we discover that an expositor for whom we have the greatest esteem has seriously offered, as another argument in favour of the practice, what he thinks of as the prayer of Psalm 132:1, **"Lord, remember David"**. That the structure needs under-pinning is undoubted - but this is special pleading.

It is another illustration of how easily convinced we frail mortals are when we want to be convinced, Whatever man may wish, and from whatever tender motives, Holy Scripture gives, in my judgment, no authority for the custom: to use words of the Church of England Article VI., the practice "is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby".

However these things may be, there is, however, no manner of doubt as to the character of Onesiphorus. There is little wonder that, when the apostle contemplates his deeds of mercy for the Lord'S servant, he should break out with the expression of his desire that he, in his turn, **"may find mercy of the Lord in that day"** (cf. Matthew 5:7). So does Paul conclude his

discussion, and illustration, of this grand trait of Fidelity; but then he turns to the other side of things.

THE EXCEPTION TO THE RULE

Note how he says:

(a) "**In Asia**," This is, of course, not our modern Asia, with its Arabia, Persia, China, Japan, India, and so on. It is probably the Roman Pro-consular Asia, though possibly only the strip of that territory, the part which is called Pauline Asia - the area that would include "**the seven churches . . . in Asia**", which Revelation 1:1 speaks of. In any case, the capital city was Ephesus.

In and around that famous town Paul had spent more than three years of ministry. He had met with considerable success, and had gathered around him a fine body of converts, and had trained a splendid lot of leaders, as Acts 20:17 ff. makes plain. What grand times they had had together, what ties of affection bound them together. Neither he nor they could ever forget the manifestations of GOD's power in that place, both in the saving of souls and in the building up of His church.

He adds (b) "**This thou knowest**". For Timothy had, for much of the time, been Paul's assistant in the mission work. (I wonder if he took the children's meetings?) He had been the spectator of all that happened, and had become familiar with all the people. And since that time of early enthusiasm, Timothy had now, for some while, been left in charge at Ephesus, to consolidate the work, and to regulate the life of the church - he had been set apart as the presiding elder, the bishop of the district. When Paul speaks here of "**all they which are in Asia**", so intimately is Timothy by now bound up with them, that it is as much as to say "all your Asians"!

Well, how have they prospered? Do they give evidence of fidelity, or of falsity? To our utter surprise we read (c) "**All . . . be turned away from me**". I think we may assume that Paul's arrest took place in those parts, and that, in his needs, he turned for help, and affection, and encouragement, to those upon whom he could so surely rely. To his dismay they disappointed him, they "**turned away**".

Either they were ashamed of being associated with a shackled prisoner, or they were afraid of what might happen to them next, if they were known to be of his company. How deeply wounded he must have been. It is bad enough to be forsaken of any; but those people had been such friends. He had himself led them to trust in the Saviour, he had been such an enormous blessing to them - and to think that they should, in the crisis, prove themselves so false!

How wonderfully would the Master enter into all that His servant was feeling and suffering. For He, too, had been arrested, and "**all the disciples forsook Him, and fled**," Matthew 26:56. How precious it is to the Christian, in his time of sorrow, and disappointment, and misrepresentation, and suspicion, and loneliness, to know that he has the understanding sympathy of the Lord. It must have meant much, so much, to Paul just then. As Horatius Bonar has it

"Men heed thee, love thee, praise thee not;

The Master praises - what are men?"

As in the former case, Paul again brings forward personal illustration, and names two outstanding instances of this despicable behaviour: Phygellus (one "I", say the pundits) and Hermogenes. They couldn't help their ugly names, of course; but they could have helped their ugly character. Two things only do we know about them: (i) They were believers - or, so I think; and (ii) They were deserters - not necessarily from the Lord, but certainly from His servant; and we do not forget that Loyalty to Him and Loyalty to His generally go together.

Oh, but if, in any sense, or in any degree, any one of us is conscious of deserting Him, or of being false to Him, let us take it home to us that that need not be the end of the story. John Mark was a deserter; but, thank GOD, he had the grace of repentance, and he came back - to do such valiant service for his Lord. Simon Peter was a deserter; but, thank GOD, he too had a mind to return - unlike Judas, who "**went and hanged himself**" in bitter remorse, he "**went out, and wept bitterly**" (Matthew 27:5; 26:75), and that was the sign and measure of his repentance. He came back, to become so courageous and consecrated a follower. Alas, that the two evil examples of our passage did not repent and return, but apparently ended their career in the deserters' camp.

What a dreadful reputation to leave behind - a believer, but a deserter! How we shrink from it; how we long to be utterly loyal. But how? The apostle leaves us in no doubt, as, looking over Timothy's shoulder while he reads his Letter, we too follow the words that bring to us

THE EXHIBITION OF THE POWER

Says he (a) "**That good thing which was committed unto thee.**" (verse 14). Shall we put it, "**The truth [as it] is in Jesus,**" Ephesians 4:21; "**The light of the glorious gospel of Christ,**" 2 Corinthians 4:4; "**This treasure in earthen vessels,**" 2 Corinthians 4:7. What an amazing privilege that all we believers should have all this, for the rapturous delight of our hearts, and for the complete satisfaction of our spirit's longings!

What an enormous responsibility that we are entrusted with it all for others - we are trustees, we are "**stewards of the manifold grace of God,**" I Peter 4:10; and "**it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful,**" I Corinthians 4:2.

This, then, we are to (b) "**Keep**". But again we ask, How? We are such "**earthen vessels,**" so liable to crack, under the impact of the forces against us.

(i) Ridicule - how difficult we find it to stand being laughed at; this is one of the evil one's most devastating weapons. More deserters are made from fear of it than from almost any other cause.

(ii) Opposition - in friendly circles we so happily maintain our keenness, but we so easily crumple up at the least danger of opposition. Faithful in the church; faithless in the office - that is, alas, so often the sad story.

(iii) Monotony - it is all very well when there is a measure of excitement abroad, a fine, successful mission, perhaps, or a deeply stirring convention: our faces are radiant, our hearts

aglow, in Plato's word we "walk on air" . . . But then we come down at last to plain earth again - the glow of Sunday Night is followed by the gloom of Monday Morning; and all our keenness seems to evaporate. Is that it? "**Be . . . fervent in spirit**", says Romans 12:11 to the fully surrendered soul of verses 1 and 2; and a beautiful thought connected with that is "Maintain the spiritual glow". Yes, "**keep**" it going, "**keep**" it up - when life has returned to the ordinary humdrum of the commonplace.

(iv) Temptation - shows no sign of diminishing; new allurements come to accompany the old; and if we know not where to look for the victory [such as, for instance, in Psalm 25:15] we are overcome, and even overwhelmed, and in despair we give the whole thing up.

Yes, it is this keeping that is the problem. Let us, then, assure ourselves that because, as we saw in our last study, He is "**able to keep that which I have committed unto Him**," I, on my part, am able to keep "**that good thing which was committed unto**" me. And this is possible to us (c) "**By the HOLY GHOST**". It is a most interesting, and most heartening, thing to notice how the HOLY SPIRIT is meant to be everything to the believer during this Age, in order that the Lord JESUS CHRIST may be glorified - what we ought to say, what we ought to do, what we ought to be: the qualities essential for all this are all found in the Scriptures linked up with the Spirit.

In Him is all our possibility for everything. Take just one illustration, as bearing upon the subject before us.

In Acts 4, the rulers in Jerusalem have Peter and John before them, and command the apostles to cease from preaching JESUS - indeed, they "**threaten them**", and "**further [threaten]**", with dire results if they disobey!

The two forthwith gathered with the company of believers, and reported all that happened, and all that was said. What shall be done? Shall they be frightened out of their loyalty; shall they, by silence, be disobedient to their Lord, false to His cause? Well, they went to prayer; and this was the burden of their petition, "**Now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto Thy servants . . .**" - What? Wisdom to keep their mouths shut? No, indeed! "**. . . that with all boldness they may speak Thy word**".

Not for one moment did they contemplate falsity. Note, then, how their fidelity was inspired and empowered: it is in verse 31, "**They were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.**" In Him is our power to avoid falsity, and to avow fidelity.

A final word on (d) "**which dwelleth in us**".

He does not say . . . "in you," as the run of the sentence might have led us to expect; but "**in us**" - bracketing himself and Timothy together, lest it should be supposed that the Spirit's indwelling was only for apostles, whereas it is, in reality, for all believers alike, "**in us**": you, Timothy; me, Paul; and all other. It is even true of the unsatisfactory Christian, if he is a Christian at all. It was to a very low level of Christians that Paul said, in I Corinthians 6:19, "**the Holy Ghost . . . is in you**". They ought not to have been unholy, seeing that the Holy One was there; with all His power available to the believer for his holiness.

But the fact remained that He was there, even though they were unholy. By our unchristian behaviour we may "**grieve**" Him, Ephesians 4:30; we may "**quench**" Him, I Thessalonians 5:19; but we shall not drive Him away - He remains in even such unsatisfactory Christians as those Corinthians. How sobering is the thought; but how strengthening. If He be there, then all is within my reach. Yes; but if we are to tap His mighty resources, He must be not only Resident, but President - He must not only have a place, but the whole place; which is what being "**filled with the Spirit**" means in Ephesians 5:18. Let us, then, habitually, and by faith, draw upon Him for the power for unswerving fidelity.

In his exhaustive book on "*The HOLY SPIRIT of GOD*", that great Evangelical theologian, the late Dr. W. H. Griffith-Thomas, says, "There are three special features of Christianity in relation to the individual. The first is Conversion . . . the second is Communion with GOD . . . the third is Character Now it is the peculiar province of the HOLY SPIRIT to provide and make real these three essential needs of man." We will add but this, that having begun in us from the first step, He abides in us that, by our letting Him free to function within us, He may enable us for those other steps in the pathway of utter fidelity.

~ end of chapter 4 ~
