

Reminder of the Call

Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light
Unit 3: God's Call

Sunday School Lesson for the week of February 12, 2023
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:3-14

Key Verse

Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:13)

Lesson Aim

- To introduce the idea of reminders and confirmations of the call of God to be a Christ follower
- To acquaint ourselves with Paul and Timothy so we can make connections to Timothy's situation
- To explore the roots of our faith, God's prevenient grace, and the need to claim our faith
- To examine the laying on of hands as a way to confirm faith
- To learn the importance of remembering when faith began in order to rekindle one's faith
- To reflect on self-doubt and to recall God's promise to guard the investment of our lives in faith
- To explore what it means to hold on to sound teaching
- To claim your ministry as a Christian

Reminders and Confirmation

The title for our lesson is "Reminder of the Call." Think about situations in which you need reminders of the call to keep going as a Christ follower. Another title that this lesson could be given is "Confirmation of the Call." Just as we need reminders of the call, we also need confirmations. Think of times when something tentative in your life or in your faith was made more firm. Think of times later down the road when you have looked back on those confirming experiences. Confirmations and reminders go hand in hand. These experiences are absolutely vital to sustaining faith and growing in faith.

An illustration I want to visit throughout this lesson is the occasion when people publicly profess their faith in Jesus Christ before the church. In some traditions, we call this experience "confirmation." Confirmation is symbolized by the laying on of hands. As a pastor, I have been able to witness many times both young people and adults participate in this familiar ritual in the life of the church. I have observed how these moments have provided vital touchstones for those whose faith was being confirmed. Looking back on the public parts of these experiences reminds me of the many back stories and conversations that led to the professions of faith and the laying

on of hands in these worship services. Some of my favorite memories in ministry are the occasions where I have shared in these conversations and subsequent celebrations. I will refer to the experience of confirmation as we go through this lesson. Hopefully, doing this will help you connect with similar experiences in your own life and the life of your church.

What experience(s) do you look back on where your salvation was confirmed? What was it about the experience that did this for you? How have experiences like these served as reminders to you of the call to be a Christ follower? When have you been at a low point in your faith walk, and then some reminder made a difference and you got back on track?

Next, we're going to dig into our scripture. Prepare to look deeply for the scripture's insights into our walk of faith.

A Pastor Writes to His Spiritual Son

This epistle is a pastoral letter written by the apostle Paul to a young man named Timothy. This letter is the second of two letters that have been preserved and made part of the New Testament. In both letters, Paul refers to Timothy as his child in the faith—his spiritual son. The 3rd and 4th verses help set the tone and purpose of the letter.

³ I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ⁴ Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy.

From these verses we understand that Paul was praying for Timothy non-stop. Paul remembered Timothy's tears the last time they were together. We don't really know exactly what those tears were about, but you get the impression that Timothy's spiritual state was somewhat fragile. Paul remembered Timothy's tears and a part of him probably regretted having to leave Timothy in his vulnerable condition. Paul felt the physical distance between them and longed to reunite with Timothy in the hopes that those tears could be replaced by the joy of their reunion.

Timothy was not just Paul's child in the faith, but also a fellow pastor. The role of pastor was something Timothy and Paul shared in common. Paul knew firsthand some of what he was going through. Paul knew the responsibility that Timothy was carrying on his shoulders. Paul, however, was definitely the more experienced pastor, and Timothy still had a lot to learn.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul said, "Let no one despise your youth" (1 Timothy 4:12a). Timothy was a young adult, and apparently there were some in the church who held his young age against him in some way. I still remember being a pastor in my mid-20's. I was not only new to the role of pastor, I was also a newcomer to adulthood with a young wife. We both worked full-time, and we had a one-year-old. I like that Paul encouraged Timothy to embrace his youth as an asset, and not necessarily as a liability. Even though Timothy was young, Paul knew that he could still "set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12b). Nevertheless, Timothy was unsure of himself.

How will Paul speak into Timothy's life? What wisdom will he have to share? Perhaps the most urgent question is, "Where will Paul begin?"

How have you been in Timothy's situation before in your life? How would you describe your own situation? Did someone speak into your situation and encourage you? How did they do it?

The Roots of Timothy's Faith

⁵ I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.

Paul began by reminding Timothy of his own sincere faith. Whatever doubts that Timothy might have had about being a young pastor, he possessed a sincere faith that was perhaps beyond his years. His faith had deep roots in the loving and steady witness of a believing grandmother and mother. Also, in the absence of a believing father, God had made a special provision for Timothy by giving him a mentor like Paul. These were the ones who nurtured Timothy in the faith. The faith had been modeled for Timothy, and now Paul was sure that the same deep faith lived in Timothy.

There are times when we need to remember the people who mothered and fathered us in the faith—the people who mentored and taught us—whether they are blood related or not. We need to remember them not only because the memory of their example resides in us and informs us, but also because it is a reminder of the prevenient grace of God.

Prevenient grace is the grace that comes before our salvation. It is God's work, which precedes our acceptance of Jesus as our Lord. It is the loving influence of God working in our lives to lead us to the point where we come to know the Lord. God works in our hearts through the Holy Spirit to do this, and God uses the people around us and the church to witness to us. God used Lois and Eunice, Timothy's grandmother and mother, to lead Timothy to faith in Christ. Being reminded of this experience would help Timothy remember that God began loving Timothy even before Timothy was aware of God.

Everyone's experience of God's prevenient grace is different, but know that God began working in you to bring you to faith even before you were aware of God. Think how God began to make you aware of him and his love for you. God chose us before we chose him. God claimed us before we claimed him. Sometimes we waver in our faith, but God never wavers. We are tethered to God not by our own strength, but by God's strength. God never lets go of us.

Paul reminded Timothy not only of the example of his grandmother's faith and mother's faith, but also of their love and, most importantly, God's love working through them. It was also important for Timothy to remember how he had claimed that faith for himself.

Your relationship with God must be your own. Your parents and grandparents can't believe for you. There's a saying that there are no grandchildren of God, only children of God. In other

words, you can't be one generation removed from God and live out your relationship with God through your parents. Even if you have the godliest parents in the world, they can't have a vital relationship with God for you. God wants a first-hand relationship with you, not a second hand. Paul reassured Timothy that his grandmother's faith and mother's faith had found a home in Timothy himself.

What are the roots of your faith? Who were your spiritual influences? How did God work in your life and your experiences to bring you to faith? When did you claim your faith? Was there a special moment or do things happen more gradually for you?

The Need to Remember When Faith Began in Order to Rekindle our Faith

⁶ For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands, ⁷ for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

The reason that Paul was reminding Timothy of the roots of his faith was because the gift of faith that Timothy possessed needed rekindling. The embers of Timothy's faith were cooling and needed to be fanned into flame once again. Other versions of this verse talking about the need to "stir up" the gift of God within us.

An illustration that speaks to people in my part of the country has to do with sweet iced tea. If you like sweet iced tea, you know that it's best to sweeten it when you brew it, while it is still hot. Sometimes, however, you find yourself in a restaurant in a location too far north or west where they serve only unsweetened iced tea. They have packets of sugar or sweetener on the table. Have you ever seen someone put loads and loads of sugar or sweetener in their glass and still be dissatisfied with its sweetness? You see the mound of sugar settled in the bottom of the glass. You know the problem. They do not need more sugar. They need to stir up the sugar or sweetener they already have in the bottom of the glass.

The illustration works in relation to faith. Sometimes it is better not to think of needing more faith, but stirring up the faith we already have. If you like the image of fire better, sometimes the fire in your grill doesn't need more lighter fluid. The coals just need to be fanned into flame. Save your lighter fluid.

In relation to the rekindling of Timothy's faith, Paul reminded Timothy of an earlier experience where he had laid his hands on Timothy. The laying on of hands is a symbol used since biblical times to signify the conferring of a gift and the reception of a gift. This symbol is used in healing, ordination, confirmation, consecrating, commissioning, and in conjunction with baptism. In each of these rituals, a gift is being given and received.

On an earlier occasion, Paul had laid his hands on Timothy in a ceremony. Was it confirming the gift of salvation or Timothy's ordination? The laying on of hands is used in both situations. After someone is baptized, it is appropriate to lay hands on him or her to symbolize the reception of

God's gift of grace. When someone is ordained, hands are laid upon the person to signify the gift of God's call and the response to that call. (See 1 Timothy 4:14, Acts 6:6 & 13:3.)

In the case where someone was baptized as an infant, or baptized at any age too young to make a decision for one's self, the laying on hands is used later in the person's life in the act of confirmation. This action occurs when the person accepts for himself or herself the gift of salvation by professing faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The person may be a teenager at the time or an adult. The laying on of hands symbolizes the marking of the seal of the Holy Spirit which is the mark of assurance that we have been saved. Such acts in the life of a person are meant to serve as reminders of what occurred in our lives at the time so that we can return to those times in our minds and hearts when our faith needs reaffirming. Paul was reminding Timothy of God's gift that he received. Paul was saying that God's gift was sufficient at the time and for all time. Timothy needed to rekindle that gift already granted to him.

Why did Timothy need to rekindle this gift? Evidently, Timothy had been struggling with self-doubt. It manifested itself as a spirit of cowardice or timidity. I imagine Paul's use of these words did not come as a surprise to Timothy. I imagine these words simply summing up for Timothy what he had been saying to Paul about himself. Self-doubt is a serious matter nevertheless. God does not want us to operate out of a spirit of fear, self-doubt, cowardice, or timidity. God wants us to minister out of a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Ministry requires inner strength. To love others through our ministry makes us vulnerable because we never know how that love will be received. There is always a fear that our ministry will be rejected. Still, we love. Love requires strength and courage. Love and ministry require self-discipline. We discipline ourselves to get up each day and enter the struggles of others to bring the healing and redeeming ministry of Christ.

Has there ever been a time when your faith needed rekindling or stirring up? What was going on at the time? Has someone ever reminded you to rekindle your own faith? Has someone ever reminded you of the time when faith began for you—when you said “yes” to the Lord? Is there a time when a pastor or members of the church laid hands on you in a ceremony? Was there some other experience that had the same confirming effect being described in the ritual of confirmation?

When Times of Self-Doubt Come

⁸ Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, in the power of God, ⁹ who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace, and this grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Why would Timothy be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord? Let us first consider the rest of the sentence. Why would Timothy be ashamed of Paul, the Lord's prisoner? Paul was often imprisoned because the sharing of his faith in Christ was seen by the authorities as disturbing the

peace and public order. Paul was often persecuted. Later in his letter, Paul will bring to Timothy's remembrance Paul's persecutions, sufferings, and things that happened to him in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. Paul wrote, "What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:10-12).

The world implied in so many ways that to serve Jesus Christ was a losing proposition and even dangerous. What Timothy saw happening to his mentor on a regular basis would probably cause most people to doubt whether or not they could live out this calling. Paul said however, "Join with me in suffering for the gospel." Paul reminded him that they did not do this ministry on their own power after all, but "in the power of God." God had saved them and called them with a holy calling.

Paul reminded Timothy that their calling was not something they had earned or deserved. It was not because they were qualified necessarily. There is a saying that God does not call the qualified but qualifies the called. God called Paul and Timothy "according to his own purpose and grace, and this grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began." The calling that God places on our lives is a calling that is much older than we are. Even Jesus himself stepped onto the world's stage with the story of redemption already in progress. The center of God's story of redemption was "revealed through the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

¹¹ For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, ¹² and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

It strengthens us and our response to God's call to remember that the call upon our lives is larger than we are, because the gospel we share is larger than we are. When we remember this, we can endure the low times, the hard times, the rejections, the resistance, and the times when we are let down by our fellow believers when they act more like the world than the Body of Christ.

Despite occasional feelings of failure, we do not have to feel defeated or ashamed, for we know the one we serve. We have put our trust in Christ. We have entrusted him with no less than our lives. We believe that Christ will guard this investment we have made. Christ will honor it because of who he is. Christ is more than able and more than willing to safeguard the investment of our lives. There will be a day in the future when Christ will reward us for our investment. That knowledge gives us joy in the present and the strength to serve. Christ is counting on us, and we are counting on Christ.

When has self-doubt entered your life? Have you ever been reluctant to let others know that you are a Christian? Do you need more boldness? Do you believe that God will guard the investment you make of your life?

The Importance of Holding on to Sound Teaching

¹³ Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

Notice the dual focus of what Paul is saying. In verse 12, the focus is on what we have entrusted to God. In verse 14, the focus is on what God has entrusted to us. In verse 12, Paul says that we can count on God to guard what we have entrusted to him. In verse 14, Paul is saying that we too have an active role to play to guard the good treasure entrusted to us. The Holy Spirit is living in us to help us guard this treasure. Guarding this treasure means holding to the standard of sound teaching that we have received. We hold on to this sound teaching in the faith and love that is wrapped up in our relationship to Jesus Christ. This is what it means to keep the faith.

There is an old joke about three pastors who were friends whose churches were located close together in the same town. They each had a problem with an infestation of bats in the attics of their churches. They complained about the bats and vowed to try to do something about them and report back what they did. The first pastor to do something shared that she had set up traps. She trapped the bats and took them to the outskirts of town, but the bats beat her back to the church and went back into the attic. The second pastor went into the attic with a shotgun. He scared the bats away, but it wasn't long before the bats came back into the attic. The damage he did in the attic did not please the Church Trustees. The third pastor said that he had successfully dealt with the bats. The other pastors asked, "How did you get rid of the bats?" He said, "I baptized and confirmed them, and they haven't been back to church since."

That story always makes me chuckle, but the joke only works because there have been too many people who have made a public commitment to Christ and then gone about their lives as if nothing changed. That is a sad truth.

We have been focusing on the confirmations and reminders that we need to sustain the call to follow Christ over the long haul. We must rely on sound teaching about how to live the life of love and faith as a Christ follower.

I think of people who made their decision to become a Christian as the result of an emotionally charged invitation to salvation that focused too much on avoiding hell or the fear of being left behind in the rapture. What they were accepting amounted to an insurance policy rather than an invitation to become a lifelong follower of Christ. Their decision was motivated by fear instead of love for Christ. They became satisfied with having a brief transaction that assured them of their future when they died rather than accepting a life of living *for* Christ and *in* Christ daily for the rest of their lives on earth.

Sound teaching is absolutely necessary for the life of faith. Our decision to follow Christ should be informed by sound teaching. The need for sound teaching does not end when we make our decision. It must continue because there is so much life to be lived after we begin living for Christ. Accepting Christ means accepting him as both Savior and Lord. Christ wants to be the Lord of our lives from the time we first give our lives over to him. The blessings of salvation are

not reserved for when we die. The blessings of salvation are to be experienced every day that we follow Christ as our Lord.

An important part of every confirmation experience is the place given to sound teaching. This is why churches have confirmation. Even here, care must be given to the decision a person is making. Faith is not just believing certain beliefs. It is not just about giving mental assent to a set of doctrines. Sound teaching informs a life of faith. As a pastor, I always let the confirmands attending confirmation classes know that at the end of their experience they would be given an opportunity to give their lives to Christ. The decision had to be their decision, not their parents. If they were not ready, it would be better for them to wait than just to follow the herd or go through the motions to please their parents. This is why churches often pair the confirmands one-on-one with mentors, so they can interact with someone who can model the faith before them. The confirmands can ask their mentors questions.

Sound teaching involves learning the basic Christian story contained in the Old and New Testaments. It involves believing that central story to be true and to be relevant. This learning continues throughout our lives. Sound teaching is also about how we grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, including how we develop a life of prayer, how we study the Bible, and how we participate in the life of the Church through worship, discipleship training, Holy Communion, giving, service, and witness.

This is what it means to hold onto sound teaching. This is how we guard the good treasure entrusted to us. This is a life of faith and love. As we imagine this life unfolding, we begin to get a good look at how we live this life with the help of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our ever-present companion and guide. The Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. The Holy Spirit continually teaches us as we gain insights into scripture, into the nature of God, into prayer, into our human relationships, and into the way we are called to share our faith with others. The laying on of hands at confirmation is not only meant to confirm a person's commitment to God and God's commitment to them, but it is also meant to symbolize the gift of the Holy Spirit to lead the believer in a life of faith.

One thing I share with young people and adults as I lay my hands on them in the act of confirmation is that their confirmation is also their "ordination" as they claim the ministry of the laity. The ministry of the church is not confined to the ministry of the ordained clergy. Those who are ordained to the ministry of the clergy are commissioned to lead all of God's people in the ministry that belongs to clergy and laity alike. All believers are to serve and give witness to their faith. The Holy Spirit is the One who enables believers to find and claim their ministry, equips them with the gifts that will shape what their ministry is to be, and empowers them to do more than they could do on their own power.

How are you guarding the good treasure of your faith entrusted to you by God? How are you holding on to sound teaching? Do you need to step up your routines and holy habits to grow in the grace and knowledge of your Savior Jesus Christ? If you are a lay person, are you living out your "ordination" into the ministry of the laity? Are you in tune with the Holy Spirit working in your life?

Remember that every time you celebrate the Lord's Supper is a time to recall the story of your faith and to rekindle the gift of God that is within you.

Prayer

Gracious Lord, You have given us the Church, the Body of Christ, to give us a place and a people to live out our faith. Help us recall the roots of our faith, appreciate the sufficiency of your gift of salvation, and sense the Holy Spirit working in our lives, that we may rekindle the fire of our faith and be bold in our living, our witness, and serving, through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever more. Amen.