

June 13, 2010

COME BEFORE WINTER

“Do your best to get here before winter.” 2 Timothy 4:21

We all know the feeling of putting off and putting off, of procrastinating and waiting too long.

How many letters have never been written? How many phone calls have never been made? How many compliments have been left unsaid? How many *I’m sorry’s* remain unspoken? How many *thank you’s* have never been uttered? How many *I love you’s* are still unexpressed? How many commitments are still not made because we waited too long?

Now that brings us to this scripture lesson in 2 Timothy. Let me set this passage in context. The Apostle Paul had known Timothy for some years. Paul was the one who had led Timothy to know Jesus Christ. Paul had known Timothy’s mother, and over the years had trained Timothy in the faith and had taken Timothy along with him on his missionary journeys. It is pretty certain that 2 Timothy was one of the last things Paul ever wrote. He wrote it while in prison, not long before he was executed by the Romans. Paul knew when he wrote these words that his days on this earth were numbered.

Paul was in prison in Rome and Timothy was in Ephesus, so Paul writes and asks Timothy to come to see him as soon as he can – and to bring his cloak (to warm his body), his books (to warm his mind), and his parchments (the Scriptures to warm his soul). Then Paul says this to Timothy: “Do your best to get here before winter” (2 Timothy 4:21).

Now the question is, did Timothy come? Did he actually get there before the Apostle Paul died? The truth is we don’t know. The Bible never says. Church history never says. But let me ask you something: would you have gone? If Paul wrote to you and said, “Come and come quickly; I don’t have much time left. I really need to see you before I die. Please come and bring my coat and my books and especially my Bible. I need your support and companionship.” Would you have gone, or would you have procrastinated?

This phrase, “Come before winter,” became the title of one of the most famous sermons ever preached in America. It was preached 37 times from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by Clarence Edward McCartney, one of the great preachers of the 20th century. After he preached it the first time, the church members were so moved that they called a

special meeting of their church board and mandated that every year Clarence McCartney would preach that sermon again. They wanted to hear that sermon every year, and for 37 years, every year, Clarence McCartney preached that sermon!

Now, in that sermon Clarence McCartney painted a powerful image by raising this question: What if Timothy had delayed? What if he didn't go immediately? What if he said, "Of course I'll go, but I've got a lot of stuff going on right now. I'll go, but a little later." And then when he gets down to the dock some time later, they said, "Sorry, it's too late. It's wintertime now. It's too cold. The sea is too rough. Can't go now. Wait till after winter." When spring comes, Timothy goes down and takes the first ship to Rome and he gets there and he is wondering, "Am I in time?"

Clarence McCartney imagined this amazing scene where Timothy goes to the prison and says to the jailor, "I'm here to see the Apostle Paul." And the jailer says, "You must be Timothy. You haven't heard – Paul was executed last winter." And the jailer said, "Timothy, he was looking for you. Every day, every time when I would go to his cell to take him his meal, he would always say, 'Timothy, is that you?' Is this Timothy?' 'Has Timothy come?' And when Paul died, the last words he said were, 'Tell Timothy, my beloved son in the faith, that I love him.....and I always will throughout all eternity.'"

Now, how would you feel if you were Timothy, and you hadn't made it in time? We can all relate to that, can't we? We all know the feeling of putting off and putting off, and then it's too late. I'm not trying to lay a heavy guilt trip on us this morning but rather to simply raise this question for us to grapple with a bit. What is God asking you to do? What is the thing God is calling you to do right now in your life? What step is God asking you to take? Let me give you three thoughts.

FIRST OF ALL, IF YOU NEED TO SAY, "I'M SORRY" TO SOMEONE, DO IT NOW! In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says if you come to the altar and remember that you are at odds with someone first, go be reconciled and then come back to the altar (Matthew 5:23-24). And you know full well what he is talking about, don't you? You see someone coming toward you, and your first inclination is to look the other way or to cross the street so you don't have to face him or her. Or perhaps it is that relationship in your group, in your neighborhood, in your home, in your workplace, that has grown cold or distant or

hostile or sour. You are working in the same office, living on the same street, sharing the same bed, but the relationship is chilly, cold, tense, strained, heavy.

What are you waiting for? Why don't you fix that? Oh, but you said, "It's not my fault." Of course it's not your fault, but as a Christian, it is your responsibility. Listen! Broken relationships are just too painful, too stressful, too debilitating, and too destructive. They bring ulcers, headaches, insomnia, loneliness, and bitterness. What a way to live! It's no way to live!

So if you are at odds with any other person right now, please don't let that broken relationship fester any longer. Don't let it poison your spirit or paralyze your soul. For their sake, for your sake, for God's sake, go fix it; go make peace. Say, "I'm sorry and I want things to be right with us." Go and God will go with you.

SECOND, IF YOU NEED TO SAY, "I LOVE YOU" TO SOMEONE, DO IT NOW! Have you heard about the man whose wife suddenly died? They had been married for more than forty years. Two days later after her funeral, he stood at her gravesite and stared at her coffin. Holding back the tears, he said, "She was the light of my life. She brought such joy to our home. She did everything for me. She was the perfect wife and companion. I loved her so much, and once I almost told her!" Isn't that sad? Isn't that pitiful? "Once I almost told her."

One of the most tragic things in the world is to go through life not feeling loved and accepted and respected. Another tragedy is going through life loving someone and yet never telling them. The point is, some things are so urgent, so vital, so crucial, and life can sometimes be so fragile, that we must not; we dare not put them off. The point is obvious: if you need to say, "I'm sorry" to someone; or if you need to say, "I love you" to someone, what are you waiting for? Do it now!

THIRD, IF YOU NEED TO SAY YES TO GOD, DO IT NOW! Have you heard about the man who was asked, "How are your children doing in school these days?" "Well, they are doing better," he replied. "But I do still go to PTA meetings under an assumed name!" Many parents can relate to that and understand that, and obviously that dad was just kidding. But the truth is, God is the opposite of that. He openly claims us. He openly seeks us out. He openly reaches out to us. He openly, intentionally, graciously, relentlessly, sacrificially offers gifts to us: the gift of salvation, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of eternal life, the gift of Christ, and the gift of his unconditional love.

But we have to do our part. We have to accept the gift. What are we waiting for? Why do we hold back? Why are we hesitant to accept God's gracious gift of himself? Why are we so reluctant to say yes to God?

Do you know what? God is offering you his love. Don't ask any questions. Just say yes! And God is calling you to do something and you know what it is – to join the church, to teach that class, to sing in the choir, to work with the children or youth, to make a pledge, to get in that Bible study class, to commit your life to Christ. You know what it is.

Well, what are you waiting for? Why are you putting it off? What's the holdup? Do it now; do it today! Do it this moment! Accept God's call! Accept his gift of love. Just say yes. Come to God before winter.

If you need to say, "I'm sorry," "I love you," "Yes" to God, don't procrastinate any longer. Don't put it off anymore – life is too short, too fragile. Just do it now!

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