

Ought to Do
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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2 Timothy 1:1–14

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

² To Timothy, my beloved child:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

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. ⁴Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵I 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. ⁶For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; ⁷for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

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, relying on the power of God, ⁹who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. ¹¹For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, ¹²and 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. ¹³Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

Luke 17:5–10

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ ⁶The Lord replied, ‘If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,” and it would obey you.

⁷ Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, “Come here at once and take your place at the table”? ⁸Would you not rather say to him, “Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink”? ⁹Do you thank the slave for doing what was

commanded? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, “We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!”’

It seems good to get out of the way the possible misperceptions we might have about Jesus’ use of slavery for an illustration. Professor Oliver Larry Yarbrough succinctly explains of the parable, “...it makes no comment on the slave system or the master/slave relationship. It simply uses the logic of the system to describe the matter of ‘what ought to be done.’”¹ Just as he did with shepherding and traveling dangerous roads, Jesus took something from everyday life at the time to make a point. Slavery was one framework by which people could immediately understand the many nuances of a hierarchy of power.

Slavery conveyed an understanding of the obedient servitude that went with the position of slave. Theologian Margit Ernst-Habib says further that “Jesus does not – and this is crucial – prescribe a social order of slave and master for all times and societies; rather, he uses this example to state his point: The Christian attitude is one of dutiful service and willing obedience, with God owing nothing to the believer.”² As Yarbrough simply says, “Slaves did what they were commanded; masters were not obligated to thank them.”³

So when Jesus instructs the disciples to say “we have done only what we ought to have done!” he’s not talking about those ought-to-do things that nag at us, like sitting down to read a book while thinking, “I really should be vacuuming.” He’s talking about those things we were created to do, like loving God and loving our neighbor. In Timothy’s case, this included rekindling the gift of God, holding the standard of sound teaching, and guarding the good treasure.

We are being urged to do what is fitting of us as God’s created. Another way to name this is to look at Micah: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”⁴ Living faithfully is not akin to how we do our jobs at places of employment, where we get a

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 143.

² Ibid., p. 144.

³ Ibid., p. 143.

⁴ Micah 6:8.

3 for “meets expectations” and, if we get a 5 (“exceeds expectations”) then we see a reward for our excelling.

While I am wholly invested in the self-worth and self-esteem of our kids, I wonder if we do them a disservice as children of God when everyone is given a trophy in soccer or kids get to choose out of the treasure chest at the dentist’s office after a stint in the dentist’s chair. We even do this for ourselves as adults, giving out medals for completing events like the Tough Mudder races. Don’t get me wrong, our son, Jim, received the soccer trophy, too, and I didn’t strip it away from him. My point is that we have developed a construct where doing the standard, the norm, the **expected** warrants reward. But that’s not how God’s kingdom works, that’s not how God operates. That’s not what we should expect from God. God rewards us, for certain, but not for anything we’ve done. God’s rewards are just out of God’s goodness and God’s love. This is mercy and grace.

At this week’s presbytery worship service, preaching on the parable of the prodigal son, the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber spoke of the falsehood of a capricious God who is always disappointed in our humanity. This hit home for me, having been brought up in a tradition with a system of exchanges for remaining in, or returning to, God’s good graces. To ears like mine, the last sentence from our reading from Luke – “when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'” – returns me afresh back to apologizing to God for my failings due to my humanity.

But Bolz-Weber continued, saying that’s not the God of the gospel, the God of good news, the father of the prodigal son. The son has disappointed his parent in heart-wrenching ways and his parent comes running to him with generosity, with kindness, with abundant love. This is mercy and grace. What that means is that we don’t have to puff ourselves up, inflate what we have done, in order to impress God – after all, God sees through all that anyway. So, instead, without fear or shame, we can admit that God is the one with all the power; we cannot compare, we are worthless slaves. This does not equal an apology for our humanity, for God created us and declared human life good – no, this is giving God the glory when we proclaim we cannot compare ourselves to God. This is the attitude of the

psalmist who asked of God, “what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”⁵

To God (or others!) we needn’t call attention to the ways in which have lived Christian lives. For what we do is only what we ought to do as those created to love God and love neighbor. Hoping to alert God to our goodness only makes sense when we think that it is for our works that God showers us, floods us, with mercy and grace. So, against all social convention, we do as Jesus commanded: we simply do what we ought to do. We open doors, we offer listening ears, we share, we are kind to one another. We protect one another, we defend one another, we value one another. We cut one another slack, we quietly recognize that we cannot have any idea the whole of what made the person before us and we love them exactly as they are because that is what God does for us. And, if we’re asked “why?” We answer “I am only did what I ought to have done.”

Let us pray: God, we give you thanks for all that you give and we pray for your help in doing what is fitting as your children. Amen.

⁵ Psalm 8:4.