

## **SERMON: 2 Timothy 1:1-5**

### **STEP UP AND STEP BACK**

It was, by any account, one of the most difficult things she had ever done. It came down to a heartbreaking choice. She could keep her child with her, knowing that at any time, the authorities could knock down her door, take her child away, and kill him. Or, she could hide her child somewhere, perhaps keeping him safe from the authorities, but also keeping her from being able to watch over him, care for him, and protect him.

What's a mother supposed to do? Well, this is what she did, even in less than ideal circumstances. She found a basket made of papyrus, and coated it with tar to seal it and waterproof it. Then she put her baby boy inside, walked the basket down to the Nile River, and set it among the reeds. And then, perhaps the most difficult part of all, she walked away.

I'd imagine you know the rest of the story. You know how that baby's sister watched over her little brother in that basket on the Nile. You know how Pharaoh's own daughter found that boy, drew him out of the water, and named him Moses. And you know how Moses' own mother was paid to nurse and raise the child that she had placed in the basket. But even though God blessed the child and preserved his life and allowed his mother to care for him, it still wasn't ideal. Moses' mother nursed him until he was old enough to go to school, and then she had to watch him walk away and be raised in the palace of Pharaoh. And when that boy was older, she watched as her son flee Egypt for killing a man. But what's a mother supposed to do?

As we gather this morning and celebrate God's gift of mothers, I don't imagine that many of you have had to place your baby in a basket and set it in the river. But I'd imagine that all of you either know mothers or are mothers yourselves who are forced to make difficult choices in less than ideal circumstances.

What's a mother supposed to do...when she's left all alone—abandoned by her husband—forced to raise children who are confused and hurt and angry? Or when she loses her job and the bills keep piling up? Or when she thinks back to her own childhood and reflects on her own mother but feels nothing but pain and bitterness? Or when death robs her of her husband, her parents, or even her own child? Or when she's so overwhelmed by her own mistakes and failures that she can't even comprehend trying to raise a child? What's a mother supposed to do?

Of course, mothers aren't the only ones who face less than ideal circumstances. And God's Word has wonderful comfort and encouragement for *all* of us today. Because God's Word is not *only* for mothers, not even on Mother's Day. It's for those who have prayed to become mothers, but so far God hasn't answered that prayer in that particular way. It's for those fathers who for one reason or another were forced to take on the role of mother in their families. It's for single people who wish they were married but aren't, and for other single people who are glad they aren't married but still find themselves facing less than ideal circumstances.

The apostle Paul knew what it was like to be facing less than ideal circumstances. The words we have here are the beginning of his farewell letter—he knew his life was nearing an end. And as he writes, he is chained in a dungeon like a common criminal. He is alone, stranded for simply sharing his faith with others. But in these less than ideal circumstances, Paul reflects on who he is and how he got here.

**<sup>1</sup>Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus...**

Paul recognized that his entire ministry—even his entire life—was directed by the will of God. He could look back at his time as a student, training as a Pharisee under a man named Gamaliel, and see God’s hand. He could look back to his miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus and see God leading and guiding him, changing him from a persecutor of the church into a missionary for the church. He could look around in that isolated dungeon, feel the chains around his hands and feet, and still see God keeping his promises of life in Christ Jesus. Because Paul understood that his role, his calling as an apostle, was according to God’s will.

You are all “something.” Maybe it’s a mother or father, a husband or wife, a student or teacher, a friend or co-worker, a member of this church or a visitor. Whatever your “something” may be, you have been placed there by God. It was his will that made you a mother. It was his will that brought you a spouse or gave you a job. And whatever you may be or wherever you may be, God has a message for you: “Step up!”

God calls you to carry out the responsibilities of your calling—responsibilities both to him and to others. Mothers: love and serve God and love and serve your children—teaching, training, and caring for them. Husbands: love and serve God and love and serve your wives—unconditionally and sacrificially. Children: love and serve God and honor and obey your parents, even when they frustrate you. Friends: love and serve God and use your abilities to support and encourage each other. Whatever you are, the calling God has given you comes with serious and lofty responsibilities—to God and to others.

And add one more responsibility to the list: step up and admit that you haven’t done it. Not perfectly, not like God demands. Mothers: has your service to your children and your family always been loving and joyful? Or has it sometimes been carried out with a short temper, a bitter attitude, and maybe even some angry, violent words? Husbands: have you sacrificed your own interests for the good of your wives? Or have you relished the opportunity to go out and have fun with the boys when you know your wife needs to talk, to decompress, and to rest? Children: have you honored and obeyed your parents? Or does the disrespect seep in with the eye rolls and mumbling? Friends: have you loved God and really supported each other? Or has it been all too easy *not* to talk about the drinking problem or the sex problem, because you don’t want to make things weird.

The truth is that whatever our calling may be, we have fallen short. As mothers, as friends, as Christians, we have failed to “step up” like God demands. And how do you think the Almighty God, who by his will gave us our responsibilities, reacts when he sees how we sin?

## **<sup>2</sup>...Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.**

This is what God does. He gives you his own son. In Christ, you have God’s grace, his undeserved love: forgiveness and all those other blessings that God showers on you every day. In Christ, you have God’s mercy, his unrelenting love for sinners: you don’t have to fear the threat of punishment for your failures to step up, because Jesus stepped up and took it for you. In Christ, you have God’s peace, his unfading and unshakeable comfort: no longer do sin and death define your life. In Christ you have forgiveness, new life, and eternal salvation.

This grace, mercy, and peace come to you because your Savior perfectly met all God’s demands for you. Stand back and see him love others unconditionally, obey his Father perfectly, and serve you faithfully. Stand back and see him be the perfect Son to his Father, the perfect child to his mother, the perfect teacher to his disciples. And know that he does this FOR YOU. Stand back and watch him step up and own your failures. When your sins are placed on his shoulders, he bears them willingly to the cross. When he is beaten and mocked and forsaken, he cries out FOR YOU, “Father, forgive them” (Lk.

23:34). And because of his perfect service and his ownership of your failures, he gives you the very gifts that Paul highlights at the beginning of this letter to Timothy: grace, mercy, and peace.

And as you stand back and see what your Savior does for you, stand back and let others see it, too.

Mothers are perhaps uniquely gifted to be able to do that, aren't they? They know so well what it means to find that delicate balance between allowing their children to explore and learn about the world while also directing them and guiding them and keeping them safe. It's no wonder that Paul points out the faithful service of two mothers in our reading this morning.

**<sup>5</sup> I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.**

Lois stood back and showed the Savior to her daughter Eunice. And Eunice stood back, and even though we're told that her husband was an unbeliever, she still showed the Savior to her son, Timothy. She stood back and did not hinder Timothy from going directly to Jesus—because the kingdom of God belonged to him. Is there any greater gift a mother can give than to stand back and let her children see their Savior?!

But you don't have to be a mother, like Eunice, or a grandmother, like Lois, to stand back and let others see their Savior. Notice how Paul addresses Timothy. "To Timothy, my dear son" (v. 2). Paul was never married, and he never had any children. But still the bond of faith connected him to Timothy in ways that ordinary relationships couldn't. They were more than mere friends or acquaintances. They were more, even, than fellow workers, missionaries in God's kingdom. They were father and son in the faith.

Stand back and see how God uses your relationships and connections with others to form that bond of faith. Perhaps you haven't been blessed with children, or perhaps you lost your own mother years ago. But you can still remember mothers and children and families in your prayers, just like Paul prayed night and day for his son in the faith. Perhaps you are single, and the worlds of marriage and parenting are entirely unfamiliar to you. But you can still teach the kids and encourage the parents to bring up their children in the Word. Perhaps you are tormented by the pain of your own childhood, or the guilt of your own mistakes, and you wonder if you even have anything to offer to your family in the faith. But you can still cling to your Savior, share the comfort of forgiveness, and point them to the cross. Perhaps you are a father, a child, an employee, or a friend, with a list of responsibilities entirely different than those of mothers. You can still step up, stand back, and show your Savior. You can live out your sincere faith. You can be there for someone who just feels alone, and desperately needs Christian company. You can rejoice as you see God's Word working in the hearts of his people.

A number of years ago, when I was in college, I met a woman who was attending college at the age of 35, after having 2 children. I got to know her fairly well when we had a couple of classes together over the years. And I was always impressed with how she was able to balance life and school and family and all her responsibilities as a mother. And so I asked her about it once. I asked how she was able to do it all, how she was able to raise her children while she was going to school, writing papers, cooking meals, doing laundry...all of it. And she just laughed and said, "You know, people like to think that the choices we make and the things we do are what determines how our kids will turn out. But really, when it comes down to it, love is what raises children."

Love—God's love—is what raises up a family of faith that prays for each other, supports each other, and encourages each other. Today, mothers, we give thanks to God for all the gifts he has given us through you. We give thanks to God, because the very thing that enables you to serve with love and faithfulness is what enables all of us to step up and stand back: the perfect love of our Savior.

*May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. Amen.*

