



Pastor Ken's Sermon

**SERMON – 20TH PENTECOST
II TIMOTHY 4:6-8, 16-18
OCTOBER 23, 2022**

“EXIT THIS WAY PLEASE”

In the year 64 AD, fire consumed a large portion of the city of Rome. Many people felt the fire was started by the Emperor Nero to rid the city of old, run-down sections, paving the way for his grand building plans. He then used the fire as a pretext to unleash persecution on the Christians of the city. The Roman historian Tacitus described what Nero imposed on a religious sect named after Christus, whom one of their regional governors had crucified some decades earlier. Now the man's followers had rallied, and a “contagion” of them, Tacitus wrote, had come to Rome.

Tacitus says it got so bad most Romans were repulsed by it, believing Nero was not one bit interested in public safety, but cruelty. While this took place, the Apostle Paul was under house arrest, quite possibly in a prison inside Emperor Nero's enormous suburban villa. Paul would have been easy to find. So, he wrote to his young protégé Timothy, saying *“I am already being poured out like a drink offering and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith.”*

How do we know this? Philippians gives us a clue. It was a letter written by Paul from his Roman prison. Listen how he closes – in chapter 4:11-12, which says, *“Greet every saint in Jesus Christ. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints (of Rome) greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.”* Well how do you like that?

While Nero was roaming Rome dealing death to the household of saints, inside his very palace Paul was dealing the gospel of Jesus bringing life to the members of Nero's own household. A Christian businessman I once heard speak said this – his aim in life was to live in such a way as to be prepared personally for heaven and bring as many people with him as possible! Paul the Apostle quite evidently thought along those lines too. No one knows if Timothy made it to him in time, so Paul wanted him to know he was swinging for the fences till the very end.

We do not live under the likes of a Nero Claudius Caesar Germanicus – though many saints of God in the world today do. But the faith Paul pleaded with Timothy to hold and teach “in season and out” is caricatured, blamed, ridiculed, vastly misunderstood, in part because it is being poorly taught, I'm afraid, and when and where possible, stifled in this country. It is thought unreasonable and dismissed by detractors or thought difficult and ignored by many adherents.

But back to that sentiment of the businessman I referred to – you may think it rather haughty – but on the whole that is the mission of the church. In his farewell, Paul did not say he had won anything. Paul said he was striving to finish well – to not give up. That is the Christian way. We are conditioned by our culture to be winners, influencers, legacy leavers, that sort of thing. A better way to describe is Christian is...we finish. The other night before our council meeting, we were read a devotion written by a man who lives in Jackson, Wisconsin, who along with his wife suffered for a long time owing to a terrible automobile accident they were in. A lot of things never returned to normal for them after it.

But these words of his just hit me right over the head – he said, *“faith is its own reward.”* That is the substance of what our lesson says today – live in such a way as to validate the statement – *‘faith is its own reward’*. To know Jesus is its own reward. If Paul is correct, then we are not only prepared for heaven, we will bring other people along with us. C.S. Lewis in his book *“Mere Christianity”* wrote, *‘government exists to promote and protect the ordinary happiness of its citizens’*. But the church exists to draw people to Christ and make them “little Christs” – a term by the way he borrowed from Martin Luther.

A Christian is no more certain of death than any other person is. But we meet it confident of two things – we’ve been rescued by Christ from eternal death, and we’ll be guided by him through physical death. Paul said therefore, today is the acceptable time, today is for each of us the day of salvation. But we ask ourselves, *“why should I think about death when all the world cries “life” and “live...and live for the moment?”* I agree, that is tempting. Think of life now...death later! But if we don’t interrupt our “life now” with convictions of the death to come, then will your death, when it comes, be interrupted by life? Are you sure?

Faith is its own reward. Faith is the assurance of things unseen. If nothing in this world can make us lastingly happy, it is very likely because we were created for someplace else. One final thing. The crown of righteousness Paul speaks of in our lesson, which he says, *“will be awarded to all who long for Christ’s appearing”*, was not Paul’s by virtue of his works his *“fighting the good fight.* We dare not understand that phrase apart from its completion – kept the faith. Christ’s righteousness is made ours by faith. In the parable that Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector, it’s easy to pick the winner in this story – the tax collector – the guy who pretty much figured he’d lost the race already.

In truth both men have something in common – they can’t really see beyond themselves. The Pharisee only sees his good works – the tax collector only his sins. Neither is good of course, but tax collector at least, and the story confirms this - when all he sees is his sins, he knows his only hope is a righteous judge, and of course he’s right. The irony is we follow a man who said, *“the last shall be first and the first last.”* Folks in last place have the most to gain in the hearing of a righteous judge. It is they who curiously, long for his appearing. They have heard their judge bears a striking resemblance to their Savior. Blessed are all who long for his appearing...who lean on mercy. They’ll see it. It’s like the patrons of movie after the show is over and the lights come up. At first you’re a little blinded, until someone says *“Exit this way, please.”*

Amen.