

# Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

Trust

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24)

Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

3:14But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, 15and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. 4:1In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: 2proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. 3For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, 4and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. 5As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

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## **DIAGNOSIS: No One and Nothing to Trust**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *Teachers Who Make Ears Itch*

From the sound of this letter, Timothy could have lived in our space and time. The people around him were constantly looking for something new, especially a new and improved road to spiritual success. There were plenty of teachers out there, making their hearers' feel inadequate about the level of their own spiritual progress and stoking them to desire something more. The teachers were probably Gnostic, making their hearers' ears itch with the tantalizing suggestion that hidden inside of them there might be a pure spirit yearning for release from the crass stuff of this world. On the other hand, there was always the possibility that one was not a spiritual being at all, and thus could not be saved regardless of their personal desire. Who could know? The range of methods by which one could try to liberate one's spirit was endless and yet never quite accomplished. You could never be too sure.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *It Is Never Enough*

The endless search for proof of one's salvation or—at least, salvageability—threatened to make Christians insecure. Insecure believers can act irresponsibly: through rigid obedience to regulations, paralyzing indecisiveness, inability to love out of self-centered concern for one's own purity, unwillingness to risk, indifferent surrender to futility out of despair, etc. Timothy is urged not to let his community be busy for all the wrong reasons, or they will soon lose sight of what they should be busy about (4:2-4). They won't know who they are anymore because they won't feel confident trusting that Jesus Christ is their Savior anymore.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** – *Why Don't You Take*

### *What I Have Given You?*

People want to be told: “You’re not up to par. Here is how you can make yourself better and better every day.” That really leaves one’s life safely in one’s own hands. At least then one knows who’s in charge, and one act accordingly. But what if one is really in the hands of “God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead...” (4:1)? Worse, what if that judge proclaims, “I saved you and gave you all that you needed to live in the right way. Why did you not use it? Did you decide that the gift was not good enough, or that you could do better yourself? Do you think I am a deceitful liar who cannot be trusted with your life? You and I cannot live together in love.”

## **PROGNOSIS: We Have Trustworthy Teachers of a Trustworthy Savior**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Jesus Is Enough***

So Timothy’s job is to tell them with full certainty, day in and day out, in every situation, that Jesus is enough (4:2). His people can stop looking for their salvation here and there, trying this and that, and never quite arriving. Jesus is enough. The Jewish scriptures are powerful and true because they result in the surety of faith. This is not a confidence in one’s own perfection but in God’s testimony that God will provide the Savior to carry the life of God’s people in himself, cleanse them from sin, and bring them safely through. Christians are those who are convinced by the Holy Spirit that Jesus is this Lord and Savior, who “will keep your life...from this time on and forevermore” (Psalm 121:7-8).

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Live in Confidence***

The truth of the gospel does not raise doubts in your mind so that you are compelled to keep searching for a more solid assurance that your life will not end up a wasted and

meaningless blip. The truth makes your life a useful and meaningful journey (3:16-17). Timothy is encouraged to use the Hebrew scriptures and to encourage others to use them because these writings are trustworthy teachers and reliable educators in the wisdom and righteousness of faith, in contrast to those who teach timid insecurity. Those who do not doubt their salvation are able to pray to God, to bother God, to fight with God, and know that they will live. Jacob is an example, beginning his struggle with God by saying, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me," and ending it with, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (Genesis 32:26 and 30). People with faith like this are able to do what needs to be done for their neighbors and for the world to the best of their ability and know that they will live. They will not be overwhelmed even by the knowledge of their own sin, because their Savior is greater than their sin. The people of God need not wait until they have achieved a certain level of spirituality before they act and speak, since they are already fully qualified, "equipped for every good work" (3:17).

#### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Teachers Who Inspire Trust**

Timothy has to be careful, however, and clear-sighted and patient in his teaching. He is not to use the scriptures to find the errors in people, for this would only fuel the hesitancy that the people around him already feel. It would only send them on another round of seeking a more effective salvation. Rather, Timothy is to be vigilant in opposing the scriptures to those teachings and hints and worldviews that would rob Christians of the certainty of their faith in their trustworthy Savior (4:3). It is a difficult and subtle task given with a solemn charge. Timothy, too, will "need to pray always and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1), wise in the faith that he has the same sufficient Savior.