

Christ Community Covenant Church
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The Little Letters: The Gospel Gets Personal!

In the back of your Bible are a bunch of very small books. Maybe you are new to the Christian experience. You came to understand that Jesus loves you and that he has died for you and you have put your faith in Him. You have yielded your life to His will and His purposes. That is fantastic, and that makes you a Christ Follower – a Christian. What does not automatically follow is that all of a sudden that makes you a Bible scholar. If you didn't know these books were in the back, you could go a very long time and not even see them. By just thumbing through the Bible most of these little letters you would just thumb by.

Now, that would be a real shame. These little letters are filled with really practical words to live by. In these little books the Gospel gets personal. I'm glad because frankly, I need a faith that makes a difference in my life right now, not someday. I need something, or better said – Someone - who will get involved in my life. I need a God who cares about the day to day struggles that I have. A faith that is "pie in the sky by and by" is no use to me.

These small books contain some of the best stuff ever written about a life with God that makes a real day to day life impact. These little letters would include Paul's letters to his friends Tim, Titus and Phil. Jesus' brother Jim writes a real important book, and the disciples Pete and John. There is even a one page letter - only 13 verses - written by Jude, another sibling of Jesus, that made it into God's Holy Word.

You know what makes these little letters so vital, so urgent, and so impactful? Many of them were essentially the last words of some very old people who loved God very much, had walked with God for a very long time and had a lot of really important things to say to the rest of us sojourners before they died.

[Kind of like Randy Pausch. Diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer, the Carnegie Mellon professor began giving what is now known as the "Last Lecture – Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams." Imagine having one last lecture, one last piece of time to tell everyone everything you know and have learned in order to thoroughly enjoy life as much as possible. What would you say?

*"Death is a part of life and it's going to happen to all of us. I have the blessing of getting a little bit of advance notice and I am able to optimize my use of time down the home stretch."
"It is not the things we do in life that we regret on our death bed. It is the things we do not. Find your passion and follow it. And if there is anything that I have learned in life, you will not find that passion in things. And you will not find that passion in money. Because the more things and the more money you have, the more you will just look around and use that as the metric — and there will always be someone with more."*

*Your passion must come from the things that fuel you from the inside. That passion will be grounded in people. It will be grounded in the relationships you have with people and what they think of you when your time comes." "We don't beat the reaper by living longer, but by living well, and living fully — for the reaper will come for all of us.
The question is: what do we do between the time we're born and the time he shows up.
I'm telling you, you get real help from people who are willing to tell you the truth; earnest well meaning people. I'll take an earnest person over a hip person every day, because hip is short-term, truth is long term.]"*

These are the words of the Little Letters. Important words that deserve our most thorough examination; what if these words were meant for us, for you and for me? And they were!

1 Timothy 3:14

. . . I am writing these things to you so that you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God . . .

Some of the verses from these little known little read books are pretty famous!

2 Timothy 2:2

What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 4:6-7

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

James 1:5-6

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.

James 2:14, 17-19

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

1 Peter 2:9

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

1 Peter 5:7-10

Casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

1 John 4:16-18

So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

The Little Letters – A Quick Look See

So let's take a quick look see at these little books, the Little Letters. We will be spending the late winter up until Easter letting these letters speak to us so I figured it would be good to have an overview. Let's start with what are sometimes called the Pastoral Epistles – (epistle is another name for letter).

The Pastoral Epistles

1 and 2 Timothy: Last words from an old man – “Fight the Good Fight!”

Timothy first connected with Paul during Paul's second visit to Lystra. In Acts 16:1-3 we read that Paul not only brought Timothy into the faith but he was Timothy's main mentor in Christian leadership, having done church planting and missionary journeys together. He worked with Paul in Galatia and Mysia, Troa, Philippi and Berea (again you can read about it in Acts) and continued on to do even more work in Athens, and Thessalonica for the Corinth, Macedonia. He may be best known as Paul's appointed pastor over the church in the city of Ephesus. Here is a tidbit that might get your attention. Despite not being required due to the ruling of the Jerusalem council found in Acts 15, as an adult Timothy took circumcision himself to be a better witness among the Jews. And besides being a pretty committed evangelist, Tim was also a pretty committed friend risking his own life to visit Paul when he was in prison.

These letters are good for us because they are all about change. No longer are the churches run by apostles. Apostles are being succeeded by bishops or elders. So these letters say a great deal about how to run a church. According to church tradition he was loyal to Paul's wishes and stayed and worked in Ephesus until he finally suffered the Martyr's death himself.

One of the early songs or poems about Jesus is found in Paul's Christological Hymns and is found in 2 Timothy 2:11-13:

**The saying is trustworthy, for:
If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself.**

Titus: The Passing of a Mantle

There are two other letters generally regarded as the pastoral letters, Titus and Philemon. Titus is thought to have been written about the same time as 1 Timothy, maybe about 65 AD. It too has lots to do with church governance; Titus was the appointed pastor over the church in Crete and was left behind to do the work there when Paul was on the way back to Ephesus after being released from prison. Titus' claim to fame might be that he had the good fortune to deliver a very tough long and stern letter to the church in Corinth, we call it 2 Corinthians, and he stayed there to set things right. He must have been made of some pretty stern stuff, because that church was messed up big time!

Philemon: Love that Changes - Forgiveness that Heals

The letter is entitled Philemon, because it is the name of the person who received the letter but it is really about Onesimus, a runaway slave. You see Onesimus had stolen from his master Philemon and had run away. He high-tailed it to Rome and bumped into Paul who led him to Christ. Now Paul was sending Onesimus back home to Philemon, who had the right to kill Onesimus as a runaway slave. And Paul's letter is a letter saying to Philemon, “time to forgive and restore hope.” It is a good story of the Christian life getting personal and risky. Lots of drama here!

James: Puts Faith to Work

The brother (or I should say half brother) of Jesus puts faith to work in his letter. It is perhaps the earliest of all the books of the New Testament, only about 12 years after the death of Jesus. There were a bunch of James's in the early years of the ministry of Jesus, but the general feeling

is that this little letter was written by Jesus' younger brother. You know early on in the life of Jesus, it does not seem like the brothers of Jesus gave him much respect, much less believed that he was God. You have to admit, that would be some kind of older brother to live up to. ("Why can't you be more like Jesus?" That had to leave some hard feelings!) But church tradition tells us that James came to faith after Jesus visited him after his resurrection. Paul tells us that in 1 Corinthians 15:7. James then became one of the most influential leaders of the early church and headed up the church in Jerusalem.

That also made him brave, because the Jews were chasing down followers of Christ and persecuting them. Many other Christians fled, but James stayed home. He paid for it though. According to the historian Flavius Josephus; *"The high priest, a man bold in temperament and very indolent, convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man called James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned.* Another historian, (Hegesippus) says that James was thrown down from the pinnacle of the temple, stoned, and finally clubbed to death. Being a Christ Follower is not for cowards or sissies.

1 and 2 Peter: On Submission and False teachers

You know Peter, the great headstrong apostle who first confessed Christ as the Son of the Living God and then only hours later denied Christ three times on the night he was betrayed. He was a rock star. I can say that because his name means "rock." He too paid the price. I find it interesting that Peter speaks so much about submission, being the quintessential non-compliant in his early time with Jesus. As an old man, some 35 years after the death of Jesus, he was also crucified. According to the second century Christian writer Origen, he was crucified upside down as Peter did not feel worthy to die in the same manner as his Lord. Sound like Peter doesn't it? His letters have a lot to do with submitting to each other and to confronting false teaching.

1, 2 and 3 John: Love and Obedience

Then there is of course the beloved disciple John. He wrote the book of Jesus' life that is interestingly entitled the Gospel of John and then these three Little Letters. I like 1 John very much. From the very beginning of my faith in Christ, the words of this disciple both encouraged me and confronted me. A lot like Jesus I guess. He wrote about love and obedience, a regular theme of John and his savior. I think you will really like this study when we get there. There is a tradition that John was boiled in oil as a result of his faith in Jesus, but others believe he lived to be 95 or so. He also received the revelation of Jesus and that account is found as the last book of the Bible.

Jude: Last Days and Hard Times

Finally Jude will be the last little letter of our study. Jude, the brother of James and again the half brother of Jesus. He is also really concerned with those who are teaching false truths. Really, through the years this has been the greatest threat on the church. And the last days will be filled with it. And since we are further from the cross than we have ever been, false teaching is a terrible threat today. We will talk about that!

Our Take Away – "Walking in a manner worthy"

There is a phrase that is common to what are called the prison letters, letters Paul wrote from his confinement. Here are all five of these uses:

3 John 1:6, "You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God."

Thessalonians 2:12, "Walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory."

Philippians 1:27 "Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."

Ephesians 4:1, "Walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called."

Colossians 1:10, "Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."

I don't think these passages mean that we can somehow walk in a way that will earn merit from God or the gospel or our call; listen close to this - it is rather about bringing merit or glory to the Lord. That is, to "walk worthy of the Lord" means to walk in a way that the Lord deserves from us, not in a way that somehow we would deserve something from the Lord. A clue is found in the Colossians passage which says, "Walk worthy of the Lord, to please him." It is not about watching every step held hostage by the possibility of sin, but rather it is staying close to God so that the sin has no appeal, bringing glory to God by our journey.

<p>Illustration: Walking close to someone distracted walking by sight or holding on to belt loops walking by faith.</p>

So think this way. NOT: I must have faith and love so as to be worth God's favor; BUT RATHER: God's favor is free and it is infinitely worth trusting. Walking worthy of that favor means walking by faith, because faith is the one thing that agrees with our bankruptcy and God's infinite "worth." Looking to God's infinite worth for our help and satisfaction is "walking worthy of God."

This walk is a walk of faith. Not by sight, but with eyes of the heart. By faith. I see miracles, do you?

Benediction: Jude 24-25

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.