

Guard Duty

In the name of him who saved us and called us into a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, dear friends in Christ: Anyone who's ever served in the armed forces has almost certainly had to pull guard duty. And if so, they had to learn the three General Orders, the first of which is: "I will guard everything within the limits of my post and quit my post only when properly relieved."

Now, to the best of my knowledge, the Apostle Paul never served in the military – at least not in a secular sense. But he was very much a soldier of the cross of Jesus Christ. And as such he had spent several decades on guard duty advancing and defending the Christian faith as well as defending the faithful from those who would lead them astray. He had been appointed by the Lord Jesus himself to be his apostle to the Gentiles. And in that capacity he preached the saving Gospel and planted churches all across Asia Minor, in Greece, Italy, possibly Spain, and on a number of islands of the Mediterranean. Paul had a tremendous sense of responsibility for these congregations and for their many members. That's why half of the books of the New Testament are letters written by him to teach, encourage, correct, and in some cases rebuke these churches (or individuals in them) in order to further develop their understanding of the Christian faith and the way it is to be lived out in the lives of God's people. Paul knew he was on guard duty. He had been called to watch over the flock of God.

And now, he knew, the time had come for him to be relieved – permanently. As he writes his second letter to Timothy, who was once his young protégé, but now in his own right an overseer of many Christian congregations, Paul is in prison in Rome. He is awaiting trial. And he is under no illusions. He fully expects to be convicted, condemned to death, and executed for the high crime of confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior. *That* does worry him in the least. His faith is founded on the One who by his death abolished death and brought life and immortality to light. He knows he's going to be just fine. His concern is for those whom he is leaving behind to carry on the fight. Paul knows firsthand the many kinds of destructive forces both within and outside of the church that constantly seek to destroy it. He knows also that huge challenges lie ahead. Working as hard as he did over the years to get the church to its present state, naturally he's a little reluctant to let it go and turn things over to other hands – not unlike how the creator of a business enterprise or the owner of a farm might be hesitant to hand it all over to someone of the next generation.

But as Paul reflects on the end of his earthly life and his inability to carry on in his leading role in guarding the Church, he expresses great confidence: "I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that *he* is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me." Paul is saying that it's never been about him and his role. Jesus is the Lord of his Church, and he's the one keeping watch over and defending it. Yes, the Lord charged Paul with a great mission and entrusted to him immense responsibility; but it's always been the Lord's work through Paul that got the job done. Paul knows that when he is gone this work of Christ for his Church will continue through others whom the Lord entrusts the task.

And that's a big reason that Paul is writing to Timothy. He's one through whom Jesus will continue the work of guarding the Church. Paul is saying, "I am relieved of this duty. I'm passing it to you." Thus he charges Timothy: "Follow the pattern of sound words that you have

heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.”

I'd like to unpack Paul's charge to Timothy a bit. It's twofold. First he says, “Follow the pattern of sounds words you heard from me, in the *faith* ... that [is] in Christ Jesus.” He's talking about the Church's confession. It's the apostolic teaching and doctrine that speak the truth about Jesus: who he is and what he has done for our salvation. That's the living, beating heart of the Church. It's our greatest treasure. It's what gives us life in Christ. And therefore it's what must be guarded most zealously. Why? Because that's what Satan most seeks to confuse, confound, and destroy. His goal is to get people in the church to confess something other than the truth about Jesus, because in so doing they cease to be the living, breathing body of Christ. They forfeit the salvation Jesus died to obtain for them.

This is why we are so emphatic about the Church's doctrine; ensuring that it's sound, biblical, correct, and consistent with the original teaching of the apostles – those who were first entrusted with guarding the good deposit of the truths of Christ Jesus. And unfortunately – especially in our day – that turns a lot of people off. “Why are you so uptight about doctrine? Does it really matter that much? Can't we simply agree to disagree? Isn't an outward display of unity more important than our disagreements over details of doctrine?” My friends, these are the sorts of questions that Satan uses to get those who are on guard duty to fall asleep or to look the other way so that they can't see what mischief he's up to.

Another such ploy is the often repeated mantra that the church must change or die. “This is the 21st century, after all. We know so much more now than people knew back in ancient times. We've got to conform the teachings of the Church to the modern mindset. Otherwise we're going to lose everybody. The church must change or die.” No. Absolutely not. It's in changing its message that the church does die. It becomes less of what actually makes it the Church of the saints who are saved by grace through faith in Jesus.

Guarding the doctrine of the Church is the most important thing we do as Christians. And understand that we all have this duty. To be sure, it falls most heavily on the leaders: the pastors, teachers, elders, and other officers of the church. But every member of the Church needs to know what it is we teach and confess. Believing that deposit of doctrine is what makes you a Christian. Besides, how else will you know if you're being taught wrong? It's incumbent for each of us to be on guard duty with respect to the teachings of the Church; which means that we need to keep hearing, studying, and learning what it is that the Church teaches. A disciple is by definition someone who is learning. And we are disciples of Jesus. If you don't want to hear what he has to say through his Church, then you cannot properly call yourself his disciple.

So, guarding the Church's teaching entrusted to us is important; but that's not all that's important. Paul also charges Timothy, “Follow the pattern of sound words you heard from me, in the ... *love* that [is] in Christ Jesus.” The saying is true: faith alone saves; but saving faith is never alone. The primary fruit of faith in Jesus is love: the love that we have for one another as fellow members of the body of Christ. And this too is a form of guard duty. We are our brothers and sisters keepers. We are charged with looking out for and taking care of each other. And this is a duty we all share equally.

Obviously we are to do this in a physical sense. Caring for each other in the body we make sure that no one goes hungry or has no clothes or lacks other vital needs. If we see someone struggling, we pitch in to help. It's what we do – or at least should be doing when we become aware that any one of us is in need of some kind. Sometimes we don't know and the

one suffering is too proud to say. If and when that applies to you, get over yourself. Let your brothers and sisters show you their love. Let them guard you from whatever it is that threatens you. Let them attend your physical needs.

Perhaps less obviously, however, we are to guard each other in a spiritual sense. And this is even more important than taking care of each other in the body. If, heaven forbid, one of us should starve to death, he dies and goes to be with the Lord. But if one of us dies in a spiritual sense, he dies and goes to hell – forever.

So, how do we do that: guard each other spiritually? Well, first and foremost, by watching out for false doctrine. This is super important in our day when so many fads spring up and run rampant throughout the Church, everyone jumping on the bandwagon of the latest book, program, insight, or vision of some self proclaimed prophet or expert in church growth without really comparing the new and novel thing being taught with the Scriptures and the historic confession of the Church. If we see someone being led astray into false teaching, it's our Christian duty to point out the errors that are deceiving them and call them back to the truth.

But it's not only false teaching that destroys souls. Sin does that too. So we have to be on guard for each other with respect to sin. And for that, we need to jump over today's Gospel in which Jesus says, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Pay attention to yourselves."

Understand what Jesus is saying. You can through your actions (or lack of actions) lead someone else into temptation and sin – sin that has the potential to destroy their souls forever. Therefore you must guard yourself to ensure that you don't do that. Now, someone might protest, "But I can't make anyone sin." And that's true. But then, neither can Satan; but like him you can provide a lot of encouragement. How? Directly by actually proposing that someone else do something they know to be wrong like entering into an illicit business deal or pressuring them into an improper sexual relationship. Introducing people to unlawful drugs or providing alcohol to minors or people with drinking problems are other examples. More broadly, anytime you sit on the sideline and encourage someone to do something that isn't right – either by your direct words or merely your tacit consent – you are guilty of tempting them to sin. And as we heard, Jesus takes an extremely dim view of that.

More commonly, you also tempt others by the example you set for them. This is particularly a concern for those in positions of authority. Parents, older siblings, teachers, and yes, pastors: those under your charge are looking up to you to learn what's right and wrong, acceptable behavior or not. If you are using words that are inappropriate or violate the Second Commandment, if you are making yourself scarce from the Word and Sacrament ministry of the Church, if you're saying how much you hate someone and want to get even with them – I could go on through all the commandments, but I think you get the idea – if you do such things then those who look up to you are being told, "This is okay, and you can do it too." But it's not. For the sake of Christian love we need to guard ourselves from leading others into temptation.

And in love we must also guard from themselves those who have fallen for temptation into sin. Jesus continues, "If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him." This is the main mission and purpose of the Church: to call sinners to repentance and to proclaim to those who repent God's forgiveness in Jesus. So, if you are aware that a brother or sister in Christ is involved in an ongoing, unrepentant sin, it's your Christian duty to rebuke them

and warn them of the spiritual danger they have placed themselves in. They are playing Russian Roulette with their eternal souls. It's your job to try to stop them. You'd do it with a guy holding a gun to his head. Why would you fail to do it when he's holding it to his soul?

I'll tell you why: You fear more offending a sinner by doing what's right than you fear offending God by doing what's wrong. You're more concerned with spoiling a relationship with a friend or relative in time than you are concerned with losing that person forever. You don't want to be called judgmental. You don't want to be told to mind your own business. Friends taking care of each other and calling sinners to repent *is* our business. It's how in love we guard and keep each other in Christ and his saving Gospel.

And look: all I've spoken about this morning is not beyond us. It's simply our duty. It's the first general order: to guard the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus which have been entrusted to our care until that Day comes when we are relieved from duty. For our past failures and unworthy performance, we humbly ask God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus. And receiving it as he has promised, by the Spirit who dwells within us, let us faithfully stand guard for the faith and in love for each other. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!