

Faithfulness When Others Turn Away

“This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me; of whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes. The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus; for he oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain: but, when he was in Rome, he sought me out very diligently, and found me. The Lord grant unto him that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day: and in how many things he ministered unto me at Ephesus, thou knowest very well.” — 2 Timothy 1:15-18

Summary:

Paul’s experience shows the pain of being deserted by professed friends and fellow believers. Yet Onesiphorus stands as a noble exception: he refused to follow the crowd, openly identified with Paul in prison, diligently sought him, and repeatedly refreshed him. His example teaches that faithful service does not depend on wealth or public approval, but on courage, generosity, and a heart devoted to Christ. Paul responds with gratitude and prayer, asking mercy for Onesiphorus and his household. Even the most faithful servant still needs God’s mercy, especially on the final day.

Outline:

1. **The pain and danger of desertion**
 - Professed friends may fail, and religious defection abandons both Christ’s servant and the Gospel.
2. **The courage to stand against the majority**
 - Onesiphorus refused to follow the crowd and sought God’s approval despite opposition.
3. **Faith expressed through practical service**
 - He refreshed Paul, owned him in prison, searched for him diligently, and did what he could.
4. **Faithfulness remembered with gratitude and prayer**
 - Paul honoured his benefactor’s love and prayed for mercy upon his household.
5. **The need for mercy on the final day**
 - Good works cannot remove our need of Christ’s mercy when we stand before God.

Text

One of the most painful trials we face in this world is the failure of friends whose friendship and attachment we relied upon. Yet this is

not a rare trial. Witness the complaints of Job and David, and especially of Paul. Paul was additionally distressed by the thought that those who had left him had forsaken not merely a man and a friend, but a minister and an apostle of Christ. Their desertion was therefore nothing less than an abandonment of the faith of the Gospel.

Religious defections were foretold from the beginning. They appeared in the earliest churches and remain common. Many begin promisingly but falter; attractive blossoms do not guarantee fruit. Ministers cannot rejoice that they have not laboured in vain without trembling. The end proves and crowns all.

The defection was widespread, including “all they which were in Asia.” The apostle names two leaders, Phygellus and Hermogenes, likely because they helped lead the revolt. This is all we know of them; they would have been better forgotten. “The name of the wicked shall rot.” Some sinners rot like criminals in irons and gibbets; others, buried beneath the ground, also rot above it, remembered only for infamy and displayed as warnings of terror.

But “the memory of the just is blessed.” How honourably Onesiphorus is presented! What an exception he is to the general apostasy! He stands alone against two, against many, against all in Asia. We are not to follow a multitude in doing evil. Numbers can never make evil good or turn truth into error.

Sharing in sin is no excuse and offers no protection: though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not go unpunished. Among those who accuse and curse one another, there will be not only weeping but also gnashing of teeth.

But to move forward without support in the face of opposition, resisting the force of example and the influence of the crowd, and seeking only to please God, demonstrates nobleness and purity of principle and motive. “Them that honour me,” says God, “I will honour; but they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.”

God, therefore, is not unjust to forget the work and labor of love Onesiphorus showed toward his name through the relief and assistance he gave his servant. Paul records in the book of life the tenderness of his generosity, his courage in acknowledging him despite his imprisonment, his zeal in seeking him out in Rome, and the many ways he had already ministered to him at Ephesus.

Was Onesiphorus a man of leisure and wealth? Probably not. Christ’s servants have rarely depended greatly on the rich. Generosity often declines as wealth increases; much of what is done for the Gospel and the poor comes from ordinary people. But Onesiphorus had a public spirit and devoted himself to his work. He did what he could—and whoever does so will accomplish much, both comparatively and truly.

Was he a loser? Was Obed-edom harmed by sheltering the ark? As Henry says, the ark is a guest that always repays its host. No one has regretted doing too much for the Redeemer’s cause, nor will anyone while this promise remains: “The liberal deviseth liberal things, and by liberal things shall he stand.”

Christ also said, “There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God’s sake, who shall

not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting.”

Thus Onesiphorus earned a place among Scripture’s worthies. Wherever the Gospel is preached, his deed will be remembered. Thousands bless him for his service. He lived in Paul’s affection and prayers. Was it a small thing to be remembered by a man so powerful with God? “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”

In this way, the apostle expressed his thankfulness. His humble disposition made him deeply grateful, and favours shown during his difficulties and distresses left a lasting impression. He therefore prayed for “the house” of his benefactor—that is, his wife, children, relatives, servants, and outward estate.

Paul also prayed for his benefactor: “The Lord grant that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day.” Would such a man, despite his good works, still need mercy? This might surprise some, but not Onesiphorus. He knew that, after doing everything, he remained an unprofitable servant and could not stand if God judged him.

Everyone acquainted with the law, the Gospel, or himself recognizes his need for mercy—mercy to the end and, above all, at the last. Examining himself, he finds enough in his sins and even his duties to make him tremble and despair. Yet he looks to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ for eternal life.

And he will find it. Then he will be spared, absolved, acknowledged, applauded, and glorified. What mercy, freedom, and wealth—and how prized they will be that day! Finding mercy then secures us forever. But woe to those left to God’s justice without a Mediator! If we have not fled for refuge to seize the hope set before us, with no friend in the Judge, we are lost forever. If we do not find mercy then, we will never find it afterwards.

This sermon is taken from William Jay’s devotional, *Morning and Evening Exercises* (January 14, Evening), first published in 1854.