

TAKING THE KEYS

1 TIMOTHY

Thursday, February 21, 1974 was a big day in my life. The night before, I squirmed. Nervous and restless, I didn't sleep well. I was too excited.

I got up early that morning. My dad stayed home from work.

Together, he and I, road to the State Patrol Office - where I took the test for my Georgia Drivers' License... and I passed... on the very first try!

I still had to go to school that morning, but instead of dropping me off, dad drove straight home. I remember him pulling into the driveway. He got out of the car, *and handed me the keys!* He said, "[Sandy, it's all yours.](#)"

And I'll never forget the feeling... It was surreal. It was like stumbling out of a dream. The day you've imagined all your life is suddenly a reality.

You ladies might not understand. *For a boy it's different* - when a young man takes over the car keys it's a right of passage. He's empowered.

It didn't matter that the keys I'd received cranked a 64 Mercury Comet – *not exactly a hotrod.* The type of the car wasn't the point. *I had the keys!*

I'll never forget the thrill of taking those keys, cranking the car, backing out of the driveway, heading down the street... The euphoria lasted until I turned the corner and

could no longer see the house and my dad. That's when it hit me. I was now in sole control of a real-live, 2½ ton automobile.

No parent was in the passenger's seat. It was just me – all alone - by myself. My sense of privilege had lasted just a few seconds, before it gave way to a heavy load of responsibility. *Keys weigh more than you think!*

And this is how I feel about being a pastor. There are moments when I'm aware of the privilege I've been given. It's a lot of fun to do what I do.

To engage a passage of Scripture and wrestle with its meaning – then to pray and study and read until its intention becomes clear – then to couch it in words and illustrations that help folks see how it applies to their lives...

This is hard work, but for me sermon preparation is great fun.

It's also fun to follow God and lead a group of people.

You start with a vision from God – it's solely spiritual. It's a new method, or project, or emphasis, or mission. At first it's just an idea on a napkin...

But you believe! You trust God to bring it to pass. Hebrews 11:1, *“Faith is the substance of things hoped for...”* My faith - then your faith, begins to add structure and muscle and definition to the vision. A notion that once lived in thin air blooms into reality. People get saved, blessed, and grow.

And you realize how privileged you are to be a part. It's a blast!

Forming lifelong friendships, doing weddings, baptizing new believers, comforting folks in times of grief... are a few of a pastor's many privileges.

The greatest joy on earth is to watch God switch the light on in a heart, and bring a person to a deeper faith. That's when it's fun to be a pastor.

But sometimes the fun lasts about as long as it took me to drive around the corner in my 64 Comet. All too often the thrill gives way to a deep sense of responsibility. It hits you - *you're the one holding the keys!*

And it doesn't matter the size, or style, or luxuriousness of the car those keys crank. *All of a sudden you're moving – cars in the other lane are flying by you. Collisions are a possibility. Then you take on a passenger or two...* now you're responsible for other people's lives and welfare and safety.

And that euphoric feeling gets replaced by the realization that what you're doing is serious business. Its life and death – driving is high-stakes.

And the same is true with being a pastor. *Those keys get really heavy.*

I've been a pastor now for 30 years, and this morning, I want to talk about it – *I want to discuss what it's like to be given the keys to a church.*

And this is going to be an eye-opening experience for some of you.

When you think of church you approach it from your own frame of reference – and rightly so. You walk in, sing praises to God, listen to a message, hopefully drop an offering in the box, jump back in the car, *and then grade the sermon on the drive home...* That's okay, I know you do it!

But here's what you don't do - you never put yourself in my shoes. The church is full of backseat drivers, who've never sat behind the wheel.

As a parent, have you ever thought, *if my rowdy kids in the backseat knew how to drive a car, they'd behave themselves while I try to drive?*

Well, perhaps that's my intention for you this morning...

I want you to see church from the pastor's point-of-view. I've given this church 30 years. I'm asking for you to indulge me for the next 30 minutes.

We're in the midst of a group of messages in 1Timothy. We're calling the series, **“Church Mechanics.”** We're *popping the hood on the church!*

In numerous ways we're comparing the church to an automobile.

And today's message is entitled, **“Taking the Keys.”** Just for this morning, I want you to take a moment to feel the weight of those keys...

I'm sure the Apostle Peter understood the heaviness of the keys.

In Matthew 16 Jesus gave the keys to Peter. In verse 19, the Lord said to His disciple, **“And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...”**

Imagine the disciple who proved chicken before the rooster crowed is being given the keys of the kingdom. Peter was independent, brash, and impulsive. He made boastful statements – and then ended up eating crow. Peter hit rock bottom when he denied His Lord... *in front of a campfire girl.*

Yet Peter was a recipient of a love he didn't deserve. He was shown lavish grace. After His resurrection Jesus forgave and restored Peter.

And by the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter was made a leader.

Each time the Holy Spirit wanted to unlock the door of God's kingdom to a new people group, *guess who was there holding the keys?* It was Peter.

In Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost, in Acts 8 in Samaria, in Acts 10 at the house of Cornelius – when salvation came to the Jews, and Samaritans, and Gentiles – it was Peter handling the keys that unlocked the kingdom.

Thirty years ago God handed me the keys to Calvary Chapel...

Perhaps this is the place where you repented of your sin, and first experienced the joy of knowing Jesus – or

CC is the place where you were exposed to God's Word, and learned to walk with Him in a deeper way – or perhaps it was here that you were filled and baptized with the Holy Spirit...

Whatever your experience, CC was the key that unlocked your heart to God... What a privilege it was for Peter to play such an instrumental role in the building of God's kingdom – *and what a privilege it's been for me!*

But with that privilege come some grave responsibilities. Remember what Peter wrote to his fellow pastors, "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers..." A pastor shepherds. He leads and feeds. He oversees and cares for the welfare of the group.

Believe it or not, this means a pastor works more than one day a week.

There's more to what he does than chatting up somebody over a cup of coffee, or dedicating babies, or scheduling a T-time with the elders.

The first funeral I ever officiated was for a Vietnam Vet. The war messed him up. He came home jaded and cynical. After a failed marriage he hated everything and everybody. He was 35, but lived with his parents.

I visited him once - tried strike up a rapport. He refused to talk to me.

One night he came home after his parents had gone to sleep. He lit his mattress on fire – then sat down in the rocking chair, took a revolver, and blew his brains out.

The blast woke his dad. In a panic he put out the fire, only to walk into the living room to find his only son with a hole in his head.

The next day, the dad called me and asked me to do their son's funeral.

I couldn't believe it. I'd never done a funeral. It was like, "*Welcome to the ministry!*" I can remember thinking, "Lord, can't I start with a warm-up funeral – *a great-grandpa who died in his sleep and left behind a wonderful Christian legacy? Why do I have to start with Level 5 – only for experts?*"

Yet this has been the story of my ministry. When God wants to teach me to swim He throws me in the deep end. Thirty years later, this has happened so many times, now when God says it's time to learn a new stroke I just walk to the end of the pool where it says 12 feet deep.

I've never been able to get caught up in the euphoria of the job because of its relentless responsibilities. *Here're a few verses relating to pastors...*

Hebrews 13:17, "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you."

Here's a verse that starts out great! Don't buck the pastor. Cooperate! You don't want a pastor who hates coming to work. Make his *job joyous*.

But here's why - *he watches out for your soul!* I'll stand before God one day and be held accountable for you. I have a hard enough time watching out for my own soul. Now I'm saddled with the responsibility for a whole church. *You didn't know it, but you can make it really hard on me one day.*

At the judgment seat of Christ – when it's CCSM's turn - I'll be there. And when you walk up, God will say, *“Ok Sandy, what about this one?”*

I'm not only responsible for the stupid stuff I've done, and my kids have done - I'm accountable for the knuckled-headed blunders you've pulled.

This realization can rob a pastor of a good night's sleep!

This is why Paul sends a mixed message to Timothy... On the one hand, in 3:3 he tells Timothy, that the elders should be *“not given to wine.”*

Paul is thinking of our responsibilities. Pastors make decisions that have eternal consequences. We need to be clear-headed at all times. A glass of wine can cloud our thinking, so Paul makes wine off-limits for the pastors.

Yet later in the book Paul is again considering Tim's responsibilities...

He's got wack-os in the church following false doctrine and getting sideways with silly speculation... Older folks despise Timothy's youth...

There's a squabble over how to treat the widows... Groundless accusations are being hurled at the elders...

So Paul says to Tim in 5:23, “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake...”

It’s as if Paul concluded, “*On second thought, a glass of wine every now and then might just help you stomach this job and handle the stress!*”

Just so you know - I’m stuck on 3:3. I don’t drink alcoholic beverages.

But for my stomach’s sake, on most nights, I shut it down, pour some skim milk over a bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios, and watch Sports Center.

Every pastor needs a way to unwind from the stress, and maintain his sanity... for Timothy it was wine... for me its Honey Nut Cheerios and Sports Center.

The pastor I worry about is James Chapman. He unwinds by umpiring rec-league softball games. How rough is a job when your diversion is calling balls and strikes for drunk rednecks? He relaxes by getting ugly names screamed at him. *Being a pastor must be a really tough job!*

Here’s another verse for pastors. James 3:1, “Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment...”

What a troublesome verse to read knowing you’re a pastor and you’ll be teaching the Bible twice a week, at least 40 or 50 times over the next year.

Rather than getting a break for *knowing it* and *teaching it* – God says you better *do it*. The bar gets raised higher for the person who teaches.

Let me give you another warm, fuzzy, feel-good verse for a pastor...

In 1Timothy 4:15 Paul encourages Tim, **“Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.”** He’s saying, Timothy, be careful! Your words can send somebody to heaven or to hell.

I’m sorry... I want to be able to tell you that everybody’s job is equally hard. Nobody’s got it any tougher than anybody else, but I can’t. Not even doctors deal with heaven and hell. They only navigate life and death.

But a pastor... he opens his mouth and people draw conclusions about God - salvation - what’s true and false, and good and evil. It’s high-stakes.

One of the scariest moments of my life occurred early one morning. It was the wee hours of the morning – 2:00, 3:00 AM. The phone rang and I answered. The woman on the other end of the line was facing a crisis...

Her father had died, and she had questions about the afterlife – and how to be saved. I spoke to her for 30

minutes. I was so tired that night. I got out of bed *and stood up for the conversation* just so I could stay awake.

I remember all this only because Kathy told me about it the next day.

She asked, “*Who called last night?*” I said, “*What call?*” I couldn’t even remember I had a conversation – let alone what I said – or who it was.

Thankfully, Kathy heard my end of the discussion. She put my mind at ease that what I said was biblical - but I didn’t even remember the call...

It was just another example of what’s typical in a pastor’s life. He has to be ready for action at odd hours. *A pastor never stops being a pastor.*

In 1Timothy 4:16 Paul reminds Timothy to meditate, and study, and take heed to yourself, and what you teach, lest you send somebody to hell.

I don’t know if it always shows... but I work real hard at what I do.

I want to be precise in *what I believe* and in *how I communicate*.

If the scope of your rifle is off just a fraction, the bullet will miss its target by 20 yards. And for the same reason a pastor needs pinpoint accuracy.

I remember when we added seats to our sanctuary I got several bids from contractors. One guy gave me a

ballpark price – then later came back with his actual bid. It was three times more expensive than his first quote.

I said, “Man, if I’m that far off in my business, I’ll send a person to hell.”

A pastor has to be sound in his doctrine, and exact enough in his living for it to back up what he says. Jesus is the only one way to heaven, but life is full of booby-traps and missteps that can send a person to hell.

I’m just saying a pastor is a regular in pressure-packed situations...

When a pastor teaches God’s Word – or counsels a person at a crossroads - think of Billy Wagner trying to close a game in the bottom of the 9th. There’s pressure riding on the outcome. A lot hangs in the balance.

And unlike Billy Wagner, your pastor isn’t going to retire at the end of this season. I hope to stay on the roster - not for 30 years, but 50-60 years.

In 1 Timothy 5:18 Paul is instructing the church to pay its pastor, and he quotes an obscure OT passage, Deuteronomy 25:4, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.” Note, Paul refers to the pastor as an ox.

And that’s okay! I’ll take it... An ox is nothing fancy. There’s nothing glamorous or hip about being an ox, nor is there anything glamorous about being a pastor... An ox isn’t a sleek stallion, or a ferocious leopard, or a swift

cheetah, or a strong grizzly bear, or a clever fox - he's just an ox.

An ox is a beast of burden. He's strong, and tough, and durable, and consistent. He doesn't mind the weight of a harness. He doesn't run from responsibility. Strap a plough to his back and he can keep a straight line.

An ox can pull stuff and hauls loads for people. And the same should be true of a pastor. Rather than a glam job, a pastor is able to carry a load.

If you want "*quick*" find a rabbit. If you want "*pretty*" get a flamingo. If you would like someone "*to tell you what you want to hear*" buy a parrot.

But if you want to plough a field - plant some seed - grow a crop - reap a harvest - thresh the wheat - then find an ox *and get behind him*. Let him eat from what he grinds. He'll keep the furrows straight. He'll do his job.

And so will a good pastor! For the last 30 years I've learned to be an ox. I'm not *sleek*, or *quick*, or *pretty*. I'm a *plodder*. All I've done for 30 years is listen to God - try to do what He tells me - and do it again the next day.

I don't check the weather forecast before I get up to go to work. If it rains, or sleets, or snows it doesn't matter to me - I still go to work.

Likewise, I don't base what I do or teach on the latest opinion polls. I'm not tailoring the message to cultural trends. My goal is to speak the timeless truths of God.

And as with an ox, I've learned that God can put more on me, and by His Spirit I won't break... He can push harder and longer than I thought I could be pushed, and by His grace I'll still stand... Call me, "[Pastor Ox](#)."

I have a book in my office, and its title serves as my motto. It's called "[A Long Obedience in the Same Direction](#)." I'm up to 30 years and counting...

Let me admit there're days when I wonder what it would be like to have a regular job. *Did you know the French Foreign Legion has a recruitment website?* I've logged on. I thought about joining, *but I can't bring my wife.*

Actually, there's a guy at Bay Creek Park who has my dream job...

He runs a snow cone stand. He pulls up with his trailer about 5:30. Rolls out around 9:00 – works 3 hours – gets home in time for the end of the Braves game. He sleeps in - does lunch with his wife - piddles in his yard.

Then he heads to the park to sell snow cones to thirsty little kids.

Snow cone man doesn't have assistant pastors to manage - or power bills to pay – or rebellious people to discipline – or cults to guard against.

All he thinks about is having enough raspberry flavoring and shaved ice.

Little kids don't commit adultery, or get drunk, or get locked up, or shack up with their girlfriend, or go on a cruise instead of tithing their money.

They just like snow cones, and they love the snow cone man.

A pastor confronts sin and unbelief. He commands people to repent. Snow cone man makes everybody happy, then packs up and goes home.

Snow cone man is kind of like the worship leader. He passes out the raspberry flavoring – he sings sweet, happy songs. When Kevin was our worship leader everybody loved Kevin. He wrote cute songs and directed children’s plays. *Pastor Kevin* made your child a star. *Pastor Sandy* told you to stop cheating on your income tax. Kevin was the snow cone man.

Everybody loved *Pastor Josh*... up there next to big bad *Pastor Sandy*.

I can’t play the guitar so I’ve thought about turning in my resignation and buying out the snow cone man. Let’s see... *fighting spouses or little kids... critical church members or shaved ice... pastor or snow cone man?*

Call me, “**dumb as an ox,**” but I choose *pastor*. And here’s why, *I can do nothing else - I’ve been called by God to pastor!* This was true of Paul...

He introduces himself, 1:1, “**Paul an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the commandment of God our Savior and the Lord Jesus Christ, our hope...**”

Paul didn’t choose to be an apostle. He wasn’t thumbing through the career guide in the High School counselor’s

office reading about cool opportunities in apostle-ships. No! God commanded him to be an apostle.

Paul makes a similar statement in 1:12, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, **putting me** into the ministry.” Paul didn’t sign up for ministry. God *called him* and *installed him*.

He goes on, “**Although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man...**” Paul was the least likely candidate to pastor. Before his conversion he was a violent, angry rabbi who hated all things Jesus.

It wasn’t like Paul was recruited by a corporate headhunter working to find pastor-material for the Church. *No, Paul was the headhunter.* He was hunting down and killing Christians. Yet God *chose him* and *called him*.

In 1:16 Paul explains, God chose him to set a precedent. He describes himself as “**the chief of sinners**” – and if God chose the chief, then there’s hope for sinners like you and me. We’re all candidates for God’s grace.

I have no doubt God set a precedent when He called me to be a pastor.

At first, I didn’t want the job. *I can see...* in the South there’s a church on every corner. I wanted to be a Christian in the workplace. Business was my major in college. My goal was to make lots of money and give a bunch of it to the church. I thought the last thing we needed was another pastor.

Yet in the end my vote didn't count. God trumped me. He called me.

God commanded me not only to start a church, but a certain type of church. My mission was to launch a CC where there were no Calvarys.

If all I'd wanted to do was start another church I would've been better off calling it "Baptist" - we would've had *name recognition*. Folks wouldn't have labeled us a cult. But God wanted to establish a ministry in the Deep South that mirrored the first church in Acts - *that turned out to be Calvary Chapel!*

And my job isn't over. Today, our church is planting a CC in Barrow County. We're also encouraging CC pastors all across the Deep South.

When God called me, He set a precedent. He can use hip pastors from California to start CCs, and He can trust the keys to ole southern boys like me.

When my dad gave me the keys to that 1964 Mercury, it was already a decade old and had 100,000 miles on the odometer, but it didn't matter to me. I learned long ago the purpose of an automobile is transportation.

Sometimes you can lose perspective with a car. You forget what's important. You get fixated on the style, and shine, and comfort – your car becomes a status symbol – and you forget the ultimate usefulness of a car.

The point of any car is to get its passengers to their destination.

And this is the goal of any church – whether it’s a *fancy church*, or a *youthful church*, or a *wealthy church*, or a *heavily-attended church*, or an *innovative church* with all the options - it’s still got to get you to your destination. *And in the end isn’t that how every church will be judged?*

Our CC is probably not the type of church you enter in a car show.

You don’t walk by us and gawk. There’s nothing fancy or showy. We’ve got no diamond-tuck interior - or wide tires – or spinners. The paint job is probably by Maaco. We’re like a work truck – rugged - a Toyota 4x4.

There are newer models on the lot with more extras and accessories.

But for 30 years now we’ve been getting people to the right destination. And while you’re with us we keep you *tuned up - filled up – running right.*

In Haiti the main mode of transportation is the **Tap-Tap**. It’s a covered pick-up that drives around Port-au-Prince stopping and starting – letting people on and off. You tap on the side when you want the driver to stop.

A **Tap-Tap** is colorful and crowded. It’s a cross between a carnival bus, a taxi, and paddy-wagon. All kinds of different people are hanging on.

And I can think of no better picture for our church. We’re a **Tap-Tap**.

Sorry, CCSM isn't an **Escalade** – *you won't impress your friends riding with us...* We're not a **Lexus** – *if you're looking for comfort you'll find it elsewhere...* Not even a **Mustang** – *sleek and hip are not our trademark.*

We're a **Tap-Tap**. We're colorful. We're like a Love Bug. Anybody and everybody can jump onboard, and learn God's Word, and grace, and Spirit.

I'm thankful for our regular riders who believe in *who we are* and *what we do*. They pay the bills, and buy the gas, and keep us running. But CCSM is a **Tap-Tap**. It's not about **us** – *who we are* or *how nice we look* – it's about getting our passengers to their God-appointed destinations.

You don't measure the usefulness of a **Tap-Tap** by counting the people in the seats at any one time. You watch it as it travels along its route...

People *tap on* here, and *tap off* there... you get use to it.

Did they miss their connection? Did they jump off too early, or stay on long enough? That's not my issue. *Jesus is Lord!* I'm just a **Tap-Tap driver**.

I've got keys and it's my job is to get my riders safely to their next stop.

Of course there are quite a few folks who've been with us for decades – some of you for a couple of decades – and I appreciate your commitment!

I call you **“The unexpected joy of the ministry.”**

What I didn't anticipate about being a pastor was the benefit of long term relationships - *the way my heart has been interwoven with your heart.*

Some of you I led to Jesus, baptized you, officiated your wedding, dedicated your kids... I'm now part of your family. What an incredible joy!

Some folks tap on and off. For the time they're onboard we move them forward in their maturity. God uses us for a specific purpose at a vital time.

Others riders are long term. We're able to build something special.

For a [Tap-Tap driver](#) both type of riders are reasons to rejoice!

In 2 Timothy 2:2 Paul tells Tim, "The things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." Paul passes a copy of the keys to Tim, who passes them on to other men. This too, is a pastor's *job and joy - passing the keys.*

I can never do it all. I need to raise-up faithful men and women - fit for ministry - equipped to do the work of *loving, and serving, and teaching..*

And if that's the goal, then I've been successful.

I thank God for the army of faithful volunteers He's built-up at CC that help in the work He's called us to do. I'm privileged to be part of the team.

Though I'm passing on copies of the keys – I want you to know *I still have the originals*. Thirty years ago God handed a young man the keys.

By His grace I still have them. And every week I use the authority He's given me to **show grace... share truth... urge repentance... open doors!**

Even though the keys can get heavy at times, I haven't dropped them and lost them. I haven't misplaced them through neglect. God's Spirit has kept the devil from stealing them. *God is so faithful!* I've still got His keys.

It's been an honor to keep CC moving. When we hit a bump, we let the Holy Spirit realign the front end. Start to sputter and we pray for a tune-up.

The keys are a privilege and a responsibility I take very seriously.

I don't know what the future holds – what the next 30 years might bring.

I hope the Lord takes us home! But the day will come when I'll give the keys back to the One who gave them to me; and when I do, I want to make sure this car is still firing on all cylinders - still steered in the right direction.

Thanks for being onboard! **(Engine)** Let's keep *the pedal to the medal!*