

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time*

The Elements of a Strong Spiritual Life, Part 2

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:3-7

Code: 55-6

For this morning now we return to 2 Timothy chapter 2 and our concluding look at the first seven verses. Last week we began an examination of 2 Timothy 2:1 through 7, this morning we're going to bring that to completion.

This week I happened to be doing a little bit of reading and I came across quite an interesting account. Several years ago on the coast of New Jersey, some engineers were building a bridge over the mouth of a river which emptied into the Atlantic Ocean. And as they were putting down the pilings on their way across the river, they came to a place where they found the massive hulk of an old wooden ship buried deep into the soft sand at the bottom of the river. They realized in order to keep the configuration of the bridge moving along the proper route, they had to remove that hulk. And so they applied every mechanical means they could to pry it up and pull it up, lift it out, all to no avail. At which point a young engineer offered his suggestion. He asked if he might have permission to design a way to remove the old wooden hulk. And what he did was call for barges to be brought in and from those barges to the hulk chains and heavy cords were attached at low tide. As the tide came in to the mouth of the river and the barges begin to move upward, the ship became loosened. When the tide went out, they tightened them down as tightly again as they could, and next time the tide came in and lifted the barges, the ship was loosened a little more until finally it was completely pried free.

And the account went on to say that what the machinery of man could not accomplish, the tides had accomplished. And I thought to myself that what we cannot do in the flesh, God can do by the power of His Spirit. And that essentially is what Paul is saying to Timothy here. Timothy has come to a point in his life where he's functioning really in his human strength. As a result of that, he is weak, he has no courage. He is failing to use his gift in the fullness of its capability. He is fearful of the enemies that he's facing while he's ministering there in Ephesus where he was when Paul wrote him this letter. It's a very difficult time. He seems to be demonstrating a tendency to be ashamed of the gospel, seems to be maybe not even holding to the true faith fully as he should. And so in his time of weakness, Paul says to him in verse 1, "Be strong in...or by means of...the grace that is in Christ Jesus." By virtue of your union with Christ because you're connected to Christ, the moving of the Holy Spirit is the power in your life. And that's really the theme of this epistle.

Timothy was left to minister in Ephesus. It was a very difficult ministry. The church had fallen into ungodly behavior and an unbiblical theology. Christians were under the threat of persecution from the emperor and from Rome. And as a result it was a very hard time. Timothy was young, fighting all

kinds of battles in his own personal life, battles of his own holiness and purity. Some were saying he was too young to be a leader. And Paul tells him not to let men despise his youth. He had a lot of battles going on and was falling into a place where looking at his human resources he felt that he was inadequate to do the job.

So, Paul writes this second epistle to him, the last letter Paul ever wrote in his life before his death, and says to him, "Be strong by means of the grace," that is the assistance, unmerited assistance and help, "which is available to you through your union with Christ Jesus." Don't depend on your own strength, get in the flow of the power of God. That's the issue here.

He is calling for spiritual strength and not only on the part of Timothy but on the part of all spiritual leaders and all of God's people. So this is a word to us about how to be a strong Christian. The issue here, the elements of strong spiritual life. That's what we're looking at.

Jesus, after all, had promised in Acts 1:8, "You shall receive power after the Holy Spirit is come upon you." He had said also in Luke 24:49 that His disciples would be clothed with power from on high. In other words, we should be able to do exceeding abundantly above all we can ask or think, Ephesians 3:20 says, according to the power that works in us. The available power of God is at our disposal. And that's what Paul reminds Timothy about in this passage.

It's easy in the ministry to become weary, discouraged, weak, disillusioned, fearful, even shallow in your confidence because the battle is hard. And it's incessant and we're human. And that's where Timothy is and that's where all of us are some of the time and some of us are most of the time. And we need the word about spiritual strength.

It's not something new that a man should call for the spiritual strength of another. I think back to Joshua chapter 1 where Joshua, the successor of Moses, is confronted by God Himself. And knowing the task that awaits Joshua, as it were, to take up the leadership of his people that belonged to Moses, God says to him in Joshua 1:6, "Be strong and courageous." And then again in verse 7, "Be strong and very courageous, be careful to do according to all the law which Moses, My servant, commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right or to the left so that you may have success wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth but you shall meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it for then you will make your way prosperous and then you will have success." And in 1 Chronicles 22:13 David said to the one who followed him, Solomon, "Be strong and courageous." And those are only samples of many such exhortations throughout redemptive history.

The Apostle Paul, for example, had that attitude toward the whole of the Corinthian church. In 1 Corinthians 16:13 he said, "Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith. Act like men, be strong and let all that you do be done in love." And so spiritual strength belongs to the greatest of leaders and also

belongs to all of God's people.

Paul writing in the Galatian letter in chapter 4 and verse 19 gave his heart cry when he said, "My children with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you." In other words, I want you to be like Christ, strong and mature and powerful. Ephesians 4 indicates the same injunction when the Apostle Paul writes that you would be coming in your spiritual development to the fullness of the stature of Christ. In Colossians 1 Paul says it's my desire to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. In Ephesians 6:10 he says, "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might."

So, the call for spiritual strength comes in many ways throughout the Scriptures. And that essentially is what the Word of God is bringing to bear on our hearts in this hour today. Looking back at verse 1 by way of a brief review, the text reads, "You therefore, my son, keep on being empowered by means of the grace that is in Christ Jesus." In other words, put yourself in the position to receive the available power that flows graciously to those who are united with Christ. Live the kind of life that experiences the power of God. Timothy, don't fall into times of weakness, they are unnecessary.

Now how are we to understand what a strong Christian life is like? Well, he gives us four pictures. You remember, I mentioned them to you last week...the teacher, the soldier, the athlete and the farmer. And these four pictures portray for us in very clear terms what it means to be a strong believer. Each of them is intended to convey to us some element of spiritual strength that we need to understand.

Now, first of all, look at verse 2 again. We studied it last time, this is just a brief recap. In verse 2 he says, "And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses." In other words, that is the truth of God, the revelation of God which I taught to you, revelation from God attested to by other witnesses, not just my own opinion, the Word of God which I taught to you, these truths you entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. In other words, you're a teacher. I taught you, you teach others so they can teach others. That's the essence. We have to see ourselves as having received a deposit of truth, as he says in chapter 1 verses 12 to 14. We have received a deposit of truth to be guarded and at the same time given away...an interesting paradox. Guard its purity and give it to someone else who also will guard its purity. We have received the oracles of God. We have received the truth of God. That treasure is to be kept clean and pure and passed on to the next generation. And so he says, "Look, Timothy, you can't quit, you can't bail out, you can't drop the baton, you cannot step out of the line. You are a link in a living chain and somebody, namely me, gave the truth to you and there are faithful and competent men waiting for you to give it to them so they can give it to others." That's the living chain of which every believer is a part.

And to whom is Timothy to give the truth? Faithful men, that speaks of their spiritual character, they're loyal, they're trustworthy with the truth. Secondly, able to teach men, competent to teach.

That is their skill in terms of teaching. So pour your life into the spiritually trustworthy and the spiritually gifted who will be able to pass the truth on to the next generation. You're a teacher.

That's true of a spiritual leader, that's true of every believer. A strong believer is one who has the truth and guards it and gives it away. So a strong Christian is a diligent student of Scripture. A strong Christian is faithful to articulate that Scripture. A strong Christian is loyal to the intent and content of that Scripture and involved in the training of others who can train others still. So we're teachers...every believer has received truth to be passed on.

Now, if you see yourself as a teacher, that's the first major thrust of your spiritual strength. That's who you are. Then he moves to three metaphors...the soldier, the athlete and the farmer. They are the same three metaphors he used in 1 Corinthians chapter 9. They were very common in that time and place and therefore they are popular teaching techniques for the Apostle Paul. They emphasize certain things that are very important in spiritual strength.

First of all of those three metaphors and the second of the four pictures, let's look at the soldier in verses 3 and 4. This is a call to recognize that you're a soldier, you're in a spiritual war and you are called to be at the forefront of battle. Verse 3, "Suffer hardship along with us, or me," there's no pronoun in the original text, "as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of every day life so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier."

Now what he is saying here, first of all, is that we have to see ourselves as soldiers. First we have seen ourselves already as teachers, that's our identity, that's who we are. We have been given truth to protect and pass on. Secondly, we are soldiers and that implies that we are in a war. That's reminded...that's a reminder to us that we mentioned earlier in Ephesians 6...6:10..."Be strong in the Lord and the power of His might, take unto you the whole armor of God that you may stand against the schemes of Satan for we wrestle not against flesh and blood," but he goes on to describe the demon hosts against whom we do battle spiritual conflicts, spiritual war in Ephesians 6, and then describes our armor. In the Corinthian letter, the Second Corinthian letter, chapter 10 verses 3 to 6, he talks about our warfare and he says the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly but supernatural, as it were, to the pulling down of Satanic fortresses. We are soldiers. That is the intent that Paul has in mind for us to understand.

Not just soldiers, would you look at verse 3? We are to be good soldiers. That wonderful beautiful word kalos which means noble or excellent. We're not just dutiful soldiers, we are excellent soldiers. We're not just functionary soldiers, we are noble soldiers. If you will, we are heroic soldiers. We are the kind of soldiers who are rewarded, who bear the badges and the medals of valor and honor. You see, Christianity is not a spectator event. Christianity is not a game. Christianity is a war.

It's hard for us to understand that because we live in an environment that while philosophically is hostile to Christianity, legally and politically is not. And so we're not constantly being battered by the system, nor do we have to give our life in standing for the faith. May I suggest to you that it's harder for us to be all that a soldier should be in this environment? Because we tend to fall to the low levels of Christian life that our society allows. Our society does not demand heroism. It doesn't demand martyrdom. It doesn't demand massive sacrifice. Being a Christian won't keep you out of the university. It won't alienate you socially in every area. It won't keep you from getting a good job. It won't restrict how much income you can have. It won't get you thrown in jail. And therefore for you to be heroic in this environment is indeed a difficult thing. It takes a tremendous amount of personal and internal commitment. It would be easier to be heroic in an oppressive persecuted society where heroism was forced on you...than it is to be spiritual heroic in the kind of Christianity we experience. And so we tend not to even recognize that we're in a warfare.

I first knew it was a war some years ago when I was being kicked in the shins violently by a woman full of all kinds of demons that were screaming at me to get out of the room and acknowledging that they knew who I was and they didn't want me around there. That experience, my shins bleeding as I left that night, allowed me for the first time to recognize clearly that I was wrestling against demonic hosts who knew exactly who I was and what I was doing and that I was engaged in warfare and my life has never been the same. There's a sense in which I see the advance of the Kingdom as an eminently serious issue. This is war.

I look back to the times when I have invested in people's lives and in a sense seen the enemy working so hard right before my very face. I remember a UCLA philosophy professor who came here out of a Jewish background and wanted to know Christ. And I presented the gospel. And I gave him six months of my time, one day a week meeting at six in the morning pouring my life into him. At the end of which time he walked away, said, "I don't want to meet with you anymore." Attended a liberal seminary, wound up an Episcopalian rector. I don't know where he is with reference to the faith but he sure isn't where I intended that he should be when I was finished with him. It's a warfare and the battle is for the minds and the hearts and the souls of people.

I have gone into houses to retreat wayward husbands out of places they shouldn't have been. I have called men who were being unfaithful to their wife on the telephone and told them to leave where they were, when I was able to get the number of another woman they shouldn't have been with. You recognize in spiritual ministry, if you've got your eyes open, that you're in a war. If you don't understand that, it only indicates how far away you are from the issue and from the front. Lawsuits against us, threats against our life, threats against the viability of our ministry, accusations. In fact, I have heard lately that you may pick up the Times in weeks to come and they'll be an announcement about the fact that I'm a heretic that someone has decided ought to be made public. And those kinds of things simply point up that this is war. I'm not surprised by that, I expect that. That's just part of the battle.

Now there's a quiet side, yes. Even the Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians said, "Study to be quiet." But the quiet times seem to me only to be there so that we can catch our breath for the next wave of battle, because this is war and it never seems to go away. The times of quiet, the times of rest, the times of peace, are only for us to get a new and afresh energy for the war that is out there waiting for us.

Mark it then, a strong Christian understands that his identity is a soldier. He is a soldier. You're a soldier and you're in a war with the forces of hell against whom you wrestle in intimate combat. Now being a soldier involves several things. Look at verse 3. First thing he says is suffer hardship along with...or it could be translated perhaps best, "Endure affliction together...or take your share of suffering...or take your share of rough treatment," as J.N.D. Kelly(???) likes to translate it. In other words, look this is war and you expect that you're going to get your share of suffering. You're going to have your wounds and your pain, it's just how it is in war. You need to understand it.

Boy, that's important for us to understand. I think there are people running around purveying the idea that when you become a Christian everything is just perfect, that all Jesus wants you to do is come to give your life to Him and He'll take away all anxiety, all difficulty, all trial. I don't hear anybody saying, "Come to Christ and pick up your armor and go to the front line and fight a life long war with the demons of hell." But that's the issue...that's the reality. And this kind of cheap approach to salvation that asks people to come to Jesus so that they can eliminate all conflict out of their life is just not true. It piles a lot of false disciples up but is not related to truth. Paul is calling for you to recognize that you're in a war. And that...that provides a lot of very important perceptions that you must have.

First of all, for example, in verse 4 he mentions the word "active service." This is what you're in. There are no people who are in R&R in this army. No people are back at the base, no people are unlisted, undrafted, untrained, ununiformed or uninvolved. You're in the war. And you want to know something else? There's no place but the front line. This war only has a front line. And we're all in it together. And so Paul says since we're all in active service all the time, and we're all always on the battle front, then we all expect hard times. It's a beautiful word, that word sunkakopatheson, it's a long word because it's a combination of several words and it literally means to suffer along with everybody else. You think you should be free from any suffering? You think you should avoid any conflict in your life? Wrong. You take your fair share of difficulty just like all the other soldiers on the front line. And there is nowhere but the front line...nowhere.

You say, "Well, I don't choose to fight." Then you're just lying around to be shot. If you're taking R&R, you're lying on the front line snoozing, and that's a very dangerous place to be. The soldier then is committed to take his fair share of suffering that active duty on the front line brings.

Secondly, not only do we take our fair share of suffering because we're engaged on the front line in active service all the time, and that's going to go on all our life till we leave this world, but secondly, he says verse 4, no soldier in active service entangles or interweaves is that word empeleko, interweaves, we get the word implicate from it...no soldier in active service entangles himself in the pragmateia of every day existence, bios, the pragmatics, the stuff, the affairs of life. That's a very very important thought. The practical stuff of life is minimized. Now he's not necessarily talking about evil things, he's just talking about the stuff of our existence. Some people live for that stuff. Some people's entire life is all wrapped up in trivia, things that absolutely don't matter at all. And they're like soldiers on the front line in the midst of a battle playing games with each other. We live on a battle front that demands that we be disentangled from the stuff of life.

In Luke 9, do you remember the teaching of our Lord starting about verse 57? As they were going along the road someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go. I'll be in Your army. And Jesus said, The foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Implication by...that's not what I had in mind, and the man left. "And He said to another, Follow Me. And he said, Oh permit me first to go and bury my father." Implication...my father hasn't even died yet, I want to hang around to get my inheritance and bye to number two. "He said, Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the Kingdom of God. And another said, I will follow You, Lord, but first permit me to say goodbye to those at home and Jesus said to him, No one after putting his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the Kingdom of God." You better get the trivia out of your life. Very basic.

A soldier is a soldier and a soldier is always a soldier. You're not a soldier eight hours a day. I mean, you don't say, "Look, you can't shoot me, King's X, this is not my soldiering time." You can't do that. A soldier is a soldier at all times, a Christian is a Christian at all times. A Christian is a soldier at all times, a soldier is in active duty at all times. A soldier in active duty is on the front at all times and it's never any difference and you better disentangle yourself with the stuff of life that occupies you and renders you ineffective. We are to be consumed with our duty and the world may pass by but we're not involved.

Boy, that's not easy in our society. Very difficult. So he says you're a soldier, a soldier accepts his fair share of rough treatment, he expects it. A soldier realizes that he is in active duty at all times on the front line engaged in battles with demons of hell. And as a result of that he's not entangled with worldly things that's going to do nothing but make him vulnerable.

Thirdly, at the end of verse 4 he says, "He does what he does so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier." The soldier really does what he does to please the commander in chief. The one who enlisted him here is the commander in chief, that's what the writer has in mind, Paul. He does what he does to please his Lord, he is loyal to his Lord. Like Paul said, "Serving the Lord with all humility of mind." And then in verse 24 he said, "Look, I know you keep telling me bonds and

afflictions await me, but I don't care. I just want to finish the ministry the Lord gave me." That's the spirit...that's the spirit. I want to be a faithful steward, I want to discharge my responsibility. Christ, of course, was the perfect example of whom His Father said, "I am well pleased." And the greatest joy of the soldier would be to hear from his commander in chief, "Well done, good and faithful soldier."

If you're a soldier you do what you do to please your commander. I never had a commander. I was not drafted. I was not in the service because I had involvement in athletics and at that time when you were a college student involved in athletics you could be deferred. And I probably lost out on a lot of lessons but I did learn a little bit about commanding from some of my athletic involvement. I remember as a sophomore when I was prepared to play my first college football game, it was a great moment in my life. We were playing this game at the famous Rose Bowl, it wasn't the Rose Bowl Game, but we were playing there. And I was excited to go into that first game. We received the kickoff and our opening play was what we call a "27 power blast right" which is basically an off tackle run. I was a back and I was to lead through and knock out the linebacker, that was my job.

Well the first...this is the first play in college football for me and I was nervous, to put it mildly. I never hit anything but bags and dummies and guys on my own team. And sometimes there was little difference between the three. But now everything was for real...now everything counted...now everything mattered. And I'll never forget, it's as vivid to me as it perhaps was a week after, that hole opened up beautifully, it was a double team on the tackle and end and I went through that hole and I really did not want to throw away my entire life on this huge linebacker. You know, linebackers are not nice people. I think basically the world has come to recognize that truth. But anyway, and this was one who had a reputation. So I decided that I wasn't going to throw myself away on him and I just kind of nudged him a tiny bit. And he flattened me on the ground, went through and we had about a six, seven yard loss. That's not the way you want to establish your running game in an opening series.

Well, there's a pile of bodies lying all over the ground, including myself. And I figured nobody knew what happened. Later on, I scored a touchdown, we won the game and I thought that's the end of that little episode.

Well Monday we went to the gym to prepare for practice and the sign said "Report to the film room." And I was about to get my first exposure to the film room. So we went in there and they started to get everybody together and I thought, "Well, they won't get the first play...surely they won't get the first play, they'll get the camera going, you know, it takes a little time." But they did. They got the first play and the camera was on my side of the field so I was full screen, you know, I was right there where you could see and I went through and gave this guy a little tap with my elbow and he flattened me. And I'll never forget it. The coach said, "Stop the projector. Let's watch MacArthur, men." He said, "Run that again."

He backed it up and ran it five times in a row. And he said to me, "You won't do that anymore, will you?" I said, "No sir, I won't do that anymore." And I didn't. And I learned a great lesson. I didn't care about the cheerleaders, my parents, the fans, I was out there on that field the rest of my football career for one person that I had to stand before every Monday in the film room. And I wanted more than I wanted anything in the world the commendation of that man. That's a simple illustration but it's stuck with me through all my life. I mean, I'm happy that people are gracious and appreciate ministry, but I'll tell you one thing...there's only one person in my heart and mind who matters when it comes to the affirmation of what I do...and that's the commander in chief.

Some reporter said to me one time, "For whom do you prepare your sermons?" He says, "Newspapers are written for eighth graders." I said, "Well it might surprise you but I prepare my sermons for the Lord, to be honest, because He's the one who knows whether they're on target. And if I can go at the end of a Lord's day and pillow my head and fall asleep with the confidence that I offered the Lord the very best, then I'm a totally content person." Cause He's the one who affirms the validity of what I offered. You live to serve the commander. You don't ever want to get trapped into being a men pleaser. You remember Paul's letter to the Galatians, "Am I men pleaser?" They had accused him of being a men pleaser, and after the opening few verses of Galatians he says, "There, does that sound like a men pleaser?" You don't want to do that. Oh, you want to be all that you can be, even all things to all men, but never compromising your commitment to the commander.

There should be instant intuitive eager delightful obedience to the commander out of loving respect and awe because of who He is. You're a soldier, and what does it mean then in summary? Well, you've heard the Lord's call to battle, you've joined the fight, you're always on the front lines and you're willing to take your fair share of what comes. Not only that, but you're separated from all the unnecessary entanglements in this world, all the pragmata of life, the web of activities and interests the world throws at you for the expressed purpose of debilitating your usefulness. And you're totally consumed with receiving the approval of the Lord Himself.

Then Paul goes to a third picture, a second metaphor in verse 5, that of an athlete...the athlete. He refers elsewhere to athletes. In fact, in Ephesians 6 he refers to wrestlers. In 1 Corinthians 9 he refers to boxers and runners. But here it's kind of generic, it's just the verb athlein in general. So he says, "If anyone competes as an athlete he doesn't win the prize unless he competes according to the rules." So he says you're not only a teacher whose primary job is to guard and pass on truth, but you're a soldier and you must understand you're in a war. Furthermore, here's another picture, you're an athlete. So and also connects his list of metaphors. And then he says, "If anyone competes as an athlete..." The verb athlein means to compete in a contest. He says if you're going to be an athlete, there's a basic principle that you must adhere to. He says you cannot win the prize unless you keep the rules. And the statement is loaded with instructive information.

First of all, the very essence of athletics is effort. What separates the winners from the losers is not always talent but it is always effort. And not just the effort of the event itself but the effort long before the event ever began. If anyone is going to compete as an athlete there is a tremendous price to pay in terms of discipline, in terms of preparation. Just very basic. An athlete wants to win the prize. I mean, who wants to basketball on a court with no hoops, just dribble around till you're tired and leave? Somebody's got to win. You don't want to run in a race without a finish line, well you run till you're tired and people applaud your effort. There has to be a winner. There has to be a goal in mind.

The strong believer then is a competitor who strives to win. That's the picture. It's the picture of self-discipline. It's the picture of self-denial and self-sacrifice and tremendous effort.

How many times have we seen an athlete run a race and literally at the very peak of their speed come across the finish line and then having totally exhausted all their human faculties fall into a faint and hit the ground, having expended every ounce of available energy? That's the athlete. But his effort is always controlled by one thing. If he's going to win the prize, the stephanos, the runner's crown, it's the word for the runner's crown, not diadem which is the king's crown, if he's going to win the prize he has to keep...what?...the rules.

Now that goes beyond just the rules of the event, let me give you a little idea of what it means nominos thales(??), what does it mean he has to keep the rules? What is he really saying here? Well, in the Greek games, Olympian games, Isthmian games, whatever games there were and they had many of them, there were three prerequisites that every athlete had to fulfill. Number one, he had to be a true-born Greek. He had to be a true-born Greek. Number two, he had to prepare for ten months and stand before a statue of Zeus and swear that he had prepared for ten months. And if he had not, then he gave Zeus the liberty to take his life. Thirdly, he had to stay within the rules of his event. And if he was found not to be a true-born Greek, if it was found that he had not prepared for a full ten months, if it was found that he had in any way violated the rules of his event, he was disgraced and instantly disqualified.

It is that picture that Paul has in mind in 1 Corinthians 9:27, by the way, when he says that he as a runner and as a boxer had a fear that in ministering to others he himself would be disqualified. Those Greeks had to keep the rules, the rules of training, the rules of birth, and the rules of competition. Now this describes a professional athlete, not an amateur. This is one who for ten months was professionally involved in training for his event.

The picture then is very clear. The strong believer must be a true born Christian. The strong believer must have trained in the matters of self-denial, given over himself full time to spiritual training. He must be eager to compete. He must be compelled to win. He must be motivated by reward. And when those things are in place, he's going to be a disciplined competitor. The victory belongs to the

disciplined. That's right. You know, most people never reach their goals, never reach their dreams, never accomplish what they could accomplish with the gifts that God has given them because they never learned to discipline themselves to the hard years of effort that it takes to be the best. And, beloved, I want to tell you, discipline is the mark of spiritual maturity. The disciplined person has control of his affections, he has control of his emotions, he has control of his moods, he has control of his priorities. That's the disciplined person.

There was a study done of delinquent and non-delinquent young people in Philadelphia. One line out of that study fascinates me. They said, "The difference between the delinquent and the non-delinquent young person was the pause between the temptation and the act." Isn't that interesting? The difference between a delinquent and a non-delinquent was the pause between the temptation and the act. What you do in the pause is the issue. The delinquent young person followed the impulse. The non-delinquent made a right choice. Self-discipline acts in that gap and the disciplined person in the pause between the temptation and the act makes a right choice. That's a disciplined life. He says no to things that harm his competitive edge. He says no to things that take away his strength. And so this calls for self-restraint. This calls for self-denial and self-sacrifice and those kinds of things that belong in the athletic metaphor.

So, Paul says, "Timothy, you're a teacher. Your job is to pass on truth. You're a soldier. Recognize you're always in a war and don't be surprised when you suffer, expect it. Thirdly, you're an athlete, Timothy, and it's going to take self-denial, hard work, great effort for a long time and a will to win and gain reward." Finally, Paul gives him a third metaphor, a fourth picture, verse 6, he talks here about the farmer, or actually the tiller of the ground. He says the hard working farmer. It's a verb, kapeao, (?) but here it appears as an adjectival participle modifying the word farmer. And the verb form here means to work to the point of exhaustion, to wear yourself out, to sweat, to strain. He says, "Timothy, you're a farmer."

Now what's the issue here? Well, the teacher sort of has a built in joy of teaching his students. The soldier has the thrill of victory. The athlete has the moment of crowning. What does the farmer metaphor picture? It pictures a man who works to the point of total exhaustion in perpetual hum-drum duty. Not like a soldier who wears the badges of his courage, who knows the glory of victory. Not like an athlete who carries the crown on his head and ascends the place where he receives the plaudits of men. The farmer, he plows and sows and tends and reaps. Early and late, he fights the frost, he fights the heat, he fights too much water, too little water, bugs, weeds. Patiently, patiently waits, works to see the crop come in and mostly does it all by himself. No great excitement, no great thrill, perpetual hum- drum routine, duty, that's another part of ministry.

I understand these pictures. I know what it is to teach and pour your life into others who will teach. I know what it is to be on the edge and in the battle and to see the fury of the battle and to bear the scars and suffer the hardship. I understand that. And I understand what it is to win and wear the

crown and know the thrill of seeing victory. I understand that. But I'll tell you something, mostly I understand that ministry is perpetual hum-drum, it's routine, it's duty. You plow, you sow, you tend, you reap, you wait, you pray, you hope. There's no exhilaration to speak of. There's no competition to get your adrenalin moving. It's just hard work. That's right.

I hear young men say, "Ah, I don't want to go that ministry. Boy, there's a lot of problems there." All the more reason to go there. A lot of people afraid of hard work. I've said to so many young men, the thing you have to be committed to be successful in the ministry is a lot of exhausting hard work. Toil, by yourself, all alone. And sometimes the crop comes in the way you hoped, and sometimes it doesn't. And nobody's going to clap when it does, and nobody's going to come help you when it doesn't.

Well, why does he do it? Verse 6, that kind of hard-working farmer, then he uses the particle dei(?), it is necessary for him to be the first to receive his share of the crops. In other words, what Paul is saying is, "Look, the guy who worked the hardest gets in line first to get the fruit." That's why he does it. Blessing waits the one who works the hardest. You want God's blessing on your ministry? And I'm not talking about future, I'm talking about now and future. You want God's blessing on your ministry? Work hard at it. Be diligent. I would venture to say that very few people, very few people know what it is to literally exhaust themselves in the work of the Kingdom. And as a result, few people know what it is to share the great fruitfulness that the Lord would bring. I don't want to go beyond the Scripture, but I'll tell you, all other spiritual things being equal, I believe the greatest rewards come to those who work the hardest. That's right. There are always those people sitting around waiting for their ship to come in. It never comes. It never comes. Then there are others who are all their life building it.

And I'm not...as again I say...I'm not saying this is future reward. I'm talking now. You want to have a life and a ministry that is blessed of God now and will be also eternally rewarded? Then work hard. Work till you're exhausted. Pour your life into it. So the strong Christian then sees himself as a farmer, willing to work hard, exhausting himself to see results, patient until success comes, filled with anticipation of the joy of the fruit now and forever. I'll tell you, ministry is so exciting because you can share the fruit. And then when you think that some day the Lord will reward us and we can cast those rewards at His feet in adoration, what a privilege.

Well, the imagery is very vivid. Listen, let me sum it up, listen carefully now. Each one of these, in a sense, has the idea of self-denial. The teacher who spends his life to produce other teachers...the soldier who give his life in the duties of battle...the athlete who restricts his life for the sake of maximum effort...and the farmer who literally expends his life to produce the crop. The Lord is calling for us to give ourselves away here.

To look at it from another viewpoint. There are some things we have to endure in giving ourselves away...suffering, discipline, exhaustion. There are some things we have to avoid, all the entanglement of the world and breaking the rules, unholiness, sin. There are some things we have to obey, and that is the rules that God has set down and the orders of our commander and the laws of sowing and reaping. And there are some things that we are to enjoy, victory, fruit. And so we are called to be strong in the Lord. It's a rich picture here and there's no way that Paul wants Timothy or us to miss it, so he comes to a conclusion in verse 7. Look at it.

"Consider what I say," stop at that point for a minute. Very rarely does this kind of verse occur in the New Testament. Noe means to think over, to ponder or understand. Do you understand what I'm saying, Timothy? Think it over. Think it over. Now let me have you do that for a moment. Will you do that with me? Ponder this. Look at your own life and ask yourself, am I a strong Christian? Do I devote myself to safe guarding and proclaiming the truth like a true teacher? Am I consumed with that? Think about it, are you? And then ask yourself this, do I deny myself to serve my commander and give my life as a true soldier at any cost? Am I always on the battle front? Think about it. Are you? Am I disentangled with the trivia of this world? Think about it. And then in terms of an athlete, ask yourself this, do I discipline myself to succeed in winning the spiritual race? Do I understand self-denial? Do I understand self-sacrifice? Do I understand the effort? Do I understand that I must obey the Word of God and keep the rules lest I be disqualified? Am I an athlete who runs to win? Think about that. Am I a hard-working servant of Christ? Do I sweat in producing a spiritual crop like that true farmer? Ask yourself that. That's what he means when he says consider what I say. Consider it. How do you match up?

And then comes this word, verse 7, "For the Lord will give you understanding in every respect," is what he means. You think about it and the Lord will give you the answer. You sit back and contemplate it and He'll show you where you are. Listen, I'm through at this point, it's up to you. If you have the spiritual integrity to do an inventory on your life, the Lord will show you right where you are. He'll give you understanding. He'll open your mind. Psalm 119:73, the psalmist said, "Give me understanding that I may learn Your commandments." Think about it and take a look at yourself and the Lord will show what is there.

The common thread through all of these, really wonderful, really wonderful, it's reward. The teacher is rewarded in discipleship. The soldier is rewarded in victory. The athlete is rewarded in winning. The farmer is rewarded in tasting the fruit. And so implied in all of these, "Timothy, there's something wonderful out there." It's reminiscent of Hebrews 6:10, "For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints." Isn't that wonderful? The Lord will not forget your labor. The Lord will not forget your ministry if you're a strong Christian. He'll reward you for that.

Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, if we're going to be strong in all these ways, then we must be conformed to the building standard that You have designed and that Paul has presented to us here. I'm reminded of the words of the poet who said, "Be strong, we're not here to play, to dream, to drift, we have hard work to do and loads to lift. Shun not the struggle, face it, tis God's gift. Be strong, say not the days are evil, whose to blame and fold the hands and acquiesce, O shame. Stand up, speak out and bravely in God's name. Be strong, it matters not how deep entrenched the wrong, how hard the battle goes, the day how long, faint not, fight on, tomorrow comes the song." Reward, the song, the day when we sing in Your presence. Help us to be faithful teachers, soldiers, athletes, farmers who look beyond the moment's pain to the eternal weight of glory, knowing that no difficulty in this life has come our way, no sacrifice made here will be forgotten, no trial through which we have endured to Your glory shall go unrewarded. Father, give us that eternal perspective. Help us to know the joys of victory, the sweet taste of fruit and the anticipation of eternal reward. And be pleased with us as You are with Your Son who served as the supreme teacher, the greatest soldier who never lost a battle, and who destroyed the enemy completely, the truest athlete who ran the purest race and won the greatest prize, and the true farmer who brings in every crop. May we be like Him. In His name we pray. Amen.

Available online at: <http://www.gtycanada.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2012 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).