

Soldier, Athlete, Farmer, Son. 2 Timothy 2 1-13, Heb. 12:1-7

***You then, my child,
be strong in the grace
that is in Christ Jesus***
(vs. 1)...

Today's message should really be a baccalaureate address. You all will just have to pretend that you are once again graduating from high school, college, or apprenticeship and preparing to head off to your new careers as bright young optimistic dedicated Christians ... because that is essentially what Paul's second letter to Timothy is all about. It is his graduation speech.

As an old physically used up but not worn out Christian, in prison, soon to die, Paul is writing his last words of encouragement to his spiritual son and young disciple Timothy. Paul is jotting down his last bits of advice for Timothy who will soon be left to carry on – alone – the ministry in Ephesus that Paul had begun.

Seeing his own end, Paul is also advising Timothy even now to plan for his future ending, that is why Paul adds this instruction

what you have heard from me
through many witnesses
**entrust to faithful people
who will be able to teach
others** as well. 2 Timothy 2:2

As Paul wanted Timothy to know, so must we understand that Christianity is always a personally chosen faith, never an inherited faith. You are not a Christian just because you were born into a Christian family. Every single individual, every parent, every child, every new generation must come to their own personal relationship with Jesus Christ. So the continuation of the Christian faith is deeply reliant upon older Christians telling the stories, passing along the Gospel message, and discipling the next generation as Paul had done for Timothy and is now urging him to do with others.

In this sense, Christianity has always been one generation away from extinction. When we fail to pass along our living faith to our children, our grandchildren, they may casually wear the name but they will not be Christian and – without someone else's witness in their life – their children will grow up even further away from the Christian faith.

The truth is my friends – to put it bluntly – **this is why we are witnessing the death of the Church in America today; for whatever reasons, too many**

Christians have failed to pass along their living faith to the next generation.

Because of that failure, our children and grandchildren have once again become idol worshipping pagans. And pagans do not have the moral understanding or fortitude needed to fight, to sacrifice, to keep America as the nation that our parents dreamed of and fought and died for.

Short of a national revival, I doubt that our nation, with its abundant freedoms and opportunities, can much longer exist as it currently does. Writing in his book "Dark Agenda" even as ethnically Jewish and an agnostic, conservative commentator David Horowitz has perceptively warned – whether or not everyone believes in Christ, it has been the Christian morality and values of the majority that have formed the basis of American culture. And without that base of Christian values holding our nation together, the United States of America as a beacon of freedom and equality will not much longer stand.

This is why I am praying fervently for this coming revival and urge you to be praying for the Bedford Awakening, this Fall. We desperately need to get our own selves and the Christians in this community once again excited about boldly living as a witness to our neighbors and passing our faith along. We desperately must get the Gospel message back in front of our children's and grandchildren's eyes – so they too may come to know Jesus, trust him as their savior, and begin once again growing as disciples of Christ – this is the only hope for the future of our nation.

Share in suffering
Endure hardship
like a good soldier
of Christ Jesus.
(Verse 3)

But it is not going to be easy for those who are now working to pass our faith along to the next generation; it never has been. We have always lived on a spiritual battle field, and recently it seems as if the Devil has won most of the campaigns. That is why in his next thought Paul shifts from instructing Timothy to pass along his faith, to encouraging him to be prepared to "*endure hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus*" (vs. 3).

I know that our Bible reads "*share in suffering*," but here I think a better translations is "*endure hardship*." Which makes sense, because only mentally sick people look forward to suffering. But one of the many things that soldiers, athletes, and farmers share in common is their expectation of and willingness to endure the hardships that are necessary to reap the rewards that follow.

Think about this (young as well as old people) Whether it is for weight loss or gaining physical strength, for learning a new skill or becoming the best softball, soccer,

basketball player, or even running for political office, **Hardship and struggle is a natural part of any project we begin to better our self, our community, our nation.** Like spoiled children, our bodies and our culture naturally resist any efforts to change for the better. **So along with our desire to change the world must come the willingness to endure the hardship necessary to bring such to pass... or it just won't happen.**

In his Commentary on 2 Timothy, pastor and theologian N.T. Wright explains

The nature of the [Christian's] work is clear: suffering. Western -- Christians have often found it hard to come to terms with this. It was assumed for a long time that most if not all people in Western countries were practicing Christians; people supposed, therefore that there would be no clash between religious and civil duty. In the last two hundred years or so the picture has changed; people now assume that religion is about private spirituality and salvation, and thus they imagine that it won't impinge on public affairs to the point where others will be angry and persecute religious believers. But for Paul and Timothy Christianity is about following King Jesus, which requires all the strength that his generous grace can give (verse 1), **In particular, it [being Christian] will involve standing out for the gospel: the royal announcement, even when it challenges the assumptions and practices of the world - and the empire - all around. It is perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing Christians today to see what the contemporary equivalent of all this [suffering] might be.** This is where we, like Timothy, need Paul's urgent command to think over what he's saying (*emphasis added*)

(Paul For Everyone, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus; Tom Wright. Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. Pg 99)

Soldier, athlete, and farmer...

So there you have the set up for the rest of today's message.

- Paul is urging Timothy to be strong in his own faith,
- to be passing that faith along to others who can also pass it along,
- and to be prepared to endure the hardship that necessarily will come with such Christian evangelistic endeavors.

So next Paul gives three models from everyday life of enduring hardship for Timothy and us to think over ... especially how those hardships necessarily endured by the soldier, athlete, and farmer, apply to our Christian witness.

Endure Hardship like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

Stop and think. **What does this charge to live as a "soldier of Christ" tell you about your relationship to Jesus Christ and to this world in which we live.**

Paul is saying, that while, through faith in Christ, we have been forgiven and born again as children in the family of God, we have also become – whether drafted or voluntarily enlisted - members of Christ's earthly army in the war against Satan's domain. There

is a furious spiritual battle being waged for the hearts, souls, and minds, of not only every human being but also for the cultures they inhabit. We have been given very clear marching orders: to go, baptize, disciple, and teach. Using the weapons of our faith and righteous living to defeat the lies of the enemy.

Spiritual warfare first needs spiritual vision to see the real battle behind the physical conflict. It then needs spiritual strength to stand against the attacks of the devil and spiritual armor with which to fight back against the enemy. Last week, many of us watched the movie "The War Room" about the ability to see and fight such spiritual battles through prayer and faith in God's continued ability to intervene in human affairs. I urge you to get a copy to watch and share with you Christian friends. For until you realize that we are truly in the middle of a spiritual conflict – you will never be able to fight for the Lord's side.

Be honest with yourself, how often do you recognize the spiritual battle going on behind the day to day conflicts in our surrounding culture;

- Why do you think just 75 years after the revelation of the horrific German atrocities committed against this unique group of people that anti-Semitism is again on the rise in Europe and America? What has this remnant done to deserve such hatred and abuse?
- Why do you think people act so non-rationally, so rabidly against any Christian symbol in a supposedly public place such as a copy of the Ten Commandments on the school house wall or a 100 year old "Peace Cross" erected by Maryland veterans to honor those who died in WW1 ?
- Why do you think people are acting so non-rationally so rabidly towards anything that smacks of American cultural history: What do you think it cost Nike to drop their Betsy Ross shoes from sales – after production with some already delivered to the stores – because their spokesman Colin Kaepernick informed them that some minorities considered the colonial flag as a sign of oppression ... While I am impressed at Nikes willingness to suffer loss in order to uphold their liberal ideals, I wonder what they will now do with all those unsold shoes. How I wish more Christians than the occasional baker, photographer, or florist would be willing to endure similar hardship for what they believe. At least the Blues Brothers knew they were on a mission from God. How I wish so many of the rest of us would wake up to take a stand in the war raging all around us.

The dedicated soldier

- is **longsuffering**; enduring hardship for the sake of the cause,
- Stays **focused** on the mission, undistracted side attractions
- Gives **devoted** obedience to his commander.

Should that not define our life in Christ; who died for us that we might live for him?

And in the case of an athlete,
no one is crowned without
competing according to the rules.

Jim Thorpe has been heralded as one of the greatest athlete ever to compete.

Thorpe won 2 Olympic gold medals in the decathlon and the pentathlon in 1912. He then went on to simultaneously play professional baseball and football, changing his sport by the seasons. He was a co-founder of and the first president of what became the National Football League.

Many of his records — feats of strength, speed and cunning — would still align Thorpe with world-class athletes of today. But his Olympic achievements and awards were not allowed to count. They were stripped from the record books, after the International Olympic Committee learned that he had violated the rules of amateurism by playing minor-league baseball in 1909-10.

Since Jim Thorpe's day well over 100 Olympians have been stripped of their medals because they had not competed fairly – according to the rules. What rules do you think guide our Christian relationship with Jesus Christ?

Yes "the Son" has set us free indeed from the laws of sin and death, but that does not mean that we do not have a new set of "family rules" that God our Father expects us to live by. Such as

Loving God and others with all your might	Luke 10:27
Living by the Spirit so you will not fulfill fleshly lust	Romans 8:13
Setting your hope on God	1 Timothy 4:10
Being doers not just hearers of God's word.	James 1:22
Being transformed by renewing your mind	Romans 12:2
Becoming an unashamed workman for God	2 Timothy 2:15

These are just a few of the "rules" for Christian living that we have recently studied. Notice that they are not negatives but positive rules, not don'ts but do's ... Jesus said he came to give us an abundant life. These are the rules that he has given to enable us to live that abundant life – to compete successfully, Christianly, in the competition of life.

Christianity has never been a country club where you buy a membership and find a comfy chair. In the kingdom of God, we are members of a growing nurturing family where we exercise and run so as to win while helping our brothers and sisters do the same.

In the kingdom of this world Christians are members the Lord's army with orders to **resist** the devil so that he might flee from you. Both of these require disciplined effort and dedication to the cause. Which brings us to the farmer.

It is the farmer who does the work who ought to have the first share of the crops.

What can we learn about the Christian life from the farmer, who faces no immediate battles, no decisive contests that are won or lost in a moment; sees no cheering crowds, receives no victory parades, but rather the daily struggle to get up in the morning and do what needs to be done to bring this year's crop to harvest.

Do you realize that for all the work they do, a farmer only gets paid about once a year – when the crop is sold? And even then the amount of their reward is dependent upon the quality and quantity of their work, along with their success in the daily struggle against weather, insects, and countless other vagaries of farm life.

So what does the farmer have that we need?

Diligence, Patience, endurance, and faith.

The ability to see the long picture

to keep struggling today for a future reward.

and to have faith in God for what he/she cannot control

Here is one of my favorite verses. It is definitely a farmer's encouragement.

So let us not grow weary
in doing what is right,
for we will reap at harvest time,
if we do not give up

Galatians 6:9

Thus, from these three pictures of those who endure hardship, we glean that in this world Christians need to be...

- Dedicated like soldiers
- Disciplined like athletes
- Diligent, patient, and faithful like farmers

Are we willing to learn from these three examples ?

- Willing to endure hardship like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.
- Willing to discipline ourselves to strive to grow in our abilities and to compete according to the rules
- Willing to work diligently patiently trusting in the future fruit of our labors in God's Kingdom?

As Paul instructed Timothy: "*Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in all things...*" (2 Tim 2:7).

Let's pray about this.