

Good Soldier this is not a Game
2 Timothy 2:1-7
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The year was about 67 or 68AD. Nero was in full power and Paul was back in prison and awaiting execution.

When death knocks on your door it brings clarity of focus, and in 2 Timothy – where we will be today – Paul writes what many consider his last will and testament. He knows his life is over, but he also knows the Gospel can't end with him – while he is chained, God's word can not be chained – it must go on, it must go forth, and a big part of Paul's concern for that lies with the next generation of spiritual leaders.

Timothy was probably in his 20's or 30's. He was passionate about following Jesus like Paul, but he wasn't the forceful, faith-filled personality Paul was. Paul had a mind like few others and was able to stand up against the strongest opponents. Timothy on the other hand often found himself fearful in the face of opposition – and there was opposition – he pastored a church where the theology was slipping and where practically they weren't looking like Jesus. On top of this many were saying he was too young to lead.

The reality was Timothy looked to Paul for a lot of his strength and now with death approaching Paul knew he had to urge Timothy to place his faith in God and seek his strength in the filling of the Holy Spirit in a way he had never done before.

So what was on Paul's mind in this important moment? Come with me to 2 Timothy 2 verses 1 to 10 where Paul boils down his last will and testament to four commands he leaves his student Timothy. And he says the only thing that matters is Christ and His Gospel: Be empowered by it; Share it; Participate in it and Meditate on it – the Gospel.

Now I need to comment on why every message I preach is about the Gospel. I used to think the Gospel was the minimum requirements for how to get into heaven when we die. And if that is the case then it would be something to get under your belt and then get on with more important things.

But that's not the picture we get in the Bible. Instead Jesus spent His entire ministry talking about the Gospel and living in what He called the kingdom of God; and then every other New Testament writer did the same thing.

So I have grown convinced that the Gospel has nothing to do with minimum requirements for getting into heaven and everything to do with living with Christ in

the reality of the Kingdom of God now in a way that ultimately means will get to enjoy Christ in heaven later.

Friends we never get over the Gospel because it's the only thing we have. Saying I'm tired of hearing about the Gospel is like saying I'm tired of breathing air. We never out grow the Gospel.

With this in our minds and our text before us would you pray with me?

[Pray]

Look with me at verse 1

[Read 2 Timothy 2:1]

Are we strong? Would you describe yourself as strong in the grace of Christ Jesus?

The reality is we live in a time where on a large scale the church in North America is not healthy. Every year thousands of churches across Canada and the States close their doors. Of those that don't close 80% are either flat or declining in membership. On top of this, of the 20% that are growing, over 90% of their growth comes from transfers from other churches rather than new conversions.

The reality is that if the church in Canada does not find afresh its foundation in the grace of Christ Jesus, if it is not strengthened by the grace of Christ Jesus it will die.

Now this might sound harsh but it shouldn't surprise us that God might let this happen. While God builds His kingdom with or without us. And He is always expanding and growing His glory; His church does not always grow everywhere. Instead He allows our actions to affect and even shrink His kingdom – the way we live affects the kingdom of God.

Let me give you an example from the Bible. The Pharisees of Jesus' day had begun only a couple hundred years earlier – that's why you never read about them in the Old Testament – they didn't exist back then. But when Israel came out of captivity in Babylon about 500 years before Jesus was born – there arose a great desire not to fail like they had done before. Not to fall into idolatry and sin in order that they wouldn't end up exiled from their land ever again.

And out of that desire grew the Pharisees. A group of men dedicated to preserving the word of God and upholding the holiness of Israel. That's who the Pharisees were - talk about a great start full of honorable and sincere intentions.

And yet when Jesus came along He had nothing good to say about the Pharisees. For all their noble intentions they had become a group of legalistic rule followers who were so out of touch with God that Jesus could say:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. (Matthew 23:15)

These are the words of God to men who had dedicated their lives to maintaining the holiness of Israel. Does that seem a little intense? It does to me, and it makes me question "am I one of those Pharisees who started off with good intentions but has ended up so disconnected from God that I don't even realize it?"

The warning of the Pharisees is that good intentions are not enough. Sincerity is not enough. Instead the best of us as individuals and churches are susceptible to going astray.

And Paul knew this and so he urged Timothy to "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Get into the Gospel. Stay in the Gospel and stand strong while others fall around you.

Your life matters Timothy. Yes God is in control, yes ultimately He will not allow the gates of hell to prevail against His church, but the expanse of God's kingdom in Ephesus – where Timothy was stationed – will be affected by his ability to stand strong. Here is where God's sovereignty and human responsibility come together.

And the same responsibility and privilege has been given to us. God will move in our city and we can be part of seeing that happen, but God's movement here is dependent on our ability to stand strong.

Have you every heard of the fallout that occurs when a prominent Christian leader falls into sin? The result is people leave the church and give up on faith. And actually this is the case when any Christian fails to stand strong – people around them lose faith and the Kingdom suffers.

Does that make you nervous? How could God entrust people like us with the expanse of His kingdom? I'm not strong enough. I sin. I fail. I fall short. How can God's kingdom depend on my strength?

Perhaps you feel the same apprehension. You want to be strong but feel like you just can't. If that is you there is good news today because Paul does not call us to conjure this strength from within ourselves.

The Greek the word translated "be strong" is actually a present passive word and would be better translated "keep on being strengthened" or "**keep on being**

empowered". And as such it is something we allow to be done to us rather than something we do. Do you see the difference?

To "be strong" is an active command which is something we do. Something like keep a stiff upper lip; or don't let your emotions show; or pull yourself up by the bootstraps. That's how the world defines "be strong."

But that isn't what Paul is urging Timothy or us towards at all. Paul tells Timothy "keep on being empowered by the grace of Christ Jesus."

It's like if I told you "keep on powering your car with gas". That's good advice. Don't try to peddle your car. Don't push it. Keep on powering it with gas. The gas is what will make your car go. But you have a responsibility here too. You need to keep on powering your car with gas. Keep putting it in the tank, or your car won't run.

And this is what Paul tells Timothy. Don't grit your teeth and try to stand strong; don't push with all your might. Instead keep on being empowered by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

In chapter 1 Paul says this another way. He says:

Fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. (2 Timothy 1:6)

Paul knew the gift of God was in Timothy, but he also knew Timothy had to do the work of fanning that gift into flame. Can you see how this ties together both God's sovereignty and our responsibility?

God gives us His grace as a gift, but we have the responsibility to do something with it if it will save us or grow His kingdom.

God's sovereignty and human responsibility together. Don't give up on this. Keep being empowered by the grace of Christ. Keep filling your life with His Word. Don't grow tired or bored with seeking God because everything is on the line.

When it came to Paul's last will and testament his first concern was that his protégée Timothy would keep on being empowered by the Gospel. He wouldn't have emphasized this if he didn't think Timothy could fail here. Instead Paul knew he needed to hear this because he, Paul, used to be a Pharisee and he knew first hand that sincerity was not enough. Christ followers have to keep on empowering themselves with the grace of Jesus if they are going to stand strong. And this acts as a foundation for the other three commands Paul gives.

Look with me now at verse 2.
[Read 2 Timothy 2:2]

After being empowered by it, the second thing we are supposed to do with the grace of Christ Jesus is **share** what we have experienced with others.

Now there is a really interesting word that Paul uses here. He says “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people”. The word “witnesses” is the Greek word *marturown* from which we get the word martyr. And a martyr is an eye witness to something who is then willing to suffer or die for what they know to be true.

They are the key witnesses in the mafia trial who, although his family is in danger, refuses to be intimidated and goes to the stand. Now the only people who are willing to do this for the Gospel are people who have experienced Jesus first hand.

They haven’t read about Him in a book or heard their friend talk about Him – they have met Him. And He changed their lives like He changed Paul’s. Paul went from being a legalistic, hateful Pharisee, to being a sold out, risk anything Apostle for Jesus Christ – He was a witness.

And Paul says what you’ve received from me and many other witnesses entrust to reliable people who will pass it on to others.

The picture here is that Timothy, the pastor, is supposed to personally equip his people with the grace he received from Christ, through Paul, so that they will be able to teach others how to teach others.

A few weeks back we talked about the great commission which says:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

And we saw that the church has taken Jesus’ command to make disciples and turned it into something we can do with other Christians in a program on Wednesday nights.

But that’s not what Jesus said. What Jesus tells us to do is make disciple making disciples. Find people who don’t love Jesus and teach them to obey what Jesus commands and part of what He commands is that everyone who comes to Him is supposed to bring others towards Him too. All Christians are called to make disciple making disciples.

And this is what Paul tells Timothy. He doesn’t tell Him to keep preaching the Gospel well – though that’s part of it – but he tells him to equip his people to equip other people. “The Ministry” is not Timothy’s job; his job is to make sure his people are doing the ministry.

And that's my job as well. My job is not to do the ministry. My job is not to tell your friends about Jesus – my job is to meet Jesus face to face so that I can be an actual eye witness. I need to live out everything I'm talking about – so that I can in turn pass that encounter on to you. And really that is your job as well – know Jesus – as the Psalmist says:

Taste and see that the Lord is good. (Psalm 34:8)

And when you have tasted first hand then entrust that experience to others – share it. That's the second command Paul gives Timothy.

First, make sure you keep on being empowered by the grace of Jesus because this is the foundation, and once you have this then share it with those around you.

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The third thing Paul leaves with Timothy and with us is to **participate** in Christ's sufferings. Look at verse 3.

[Read 2 Timothy 2:3-6]

People who have been empowered by the grace of Christ Jesus are to participate in it by joining in suffering for Christ.

Now this is a bit of a strange idea. It is an active command so it is something we are actually supposed to go out and do. Paul says look for opportunities to suffer like I am suffering.

Now that sounds a bit crazy, and Paul knows that, so he gives three different pictures of what this looks like. The first way to suffer is like a soldier.

By saying this Paul reminds us that as Christians we are at war. In this same vein Ephesians tells us:

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. (Ephesians 6:10-11)

It's hard for us to get our mind around this because we live in a part of the world where none of us (or very few of us) ever suffer physical harm because of our faith. And so when opposition comes against us in the form of snarky attitudes from co-workers, or friends who change the subject when we introduce Christ – we are put off.

But to this Paul says "join with me in suffering." If you are going to follow Christ participate in the sufferings that that journey entails.

And Paul knew a lot about suffering. IN Corinthians Paul gives us a list of some of what he suffered. He says:

I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times [I got] thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea.... Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:22-28)

That's a lot of suffering! And I have to be honest, after spending about 4 seconds in the freezing waters of Ness Lake I have no desire to join Paul in being shipwrecked let alone all the beatings, stonings and imprisonments he suffered. What does Paul mean when he says "join me in suffering, like a good soldier."

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When a soldier joins the army he isn't surprised when he gets shot at – he's not happy about it, but he understands that this is part of the job.

So because good soldiers recognize they might die they don't tie themselves down with civilian affairs. Instead they give themselves whole heartedly to their commanding officer.

And Paul says when someone does this they are a "good" soldier, or the word could also be translated "excellent" or even "heroic."

Heroic soldiers have a single-minded dedication to their commanding officer and their mission. No matter what comes against them they stand strong and fight hard because they have no others cares in the world.

And that's what Paul calls us to – be heroic soldiers, get out there, find the opposition and fight for Christ. Don't fall into the cares of the world, dedicate yourself to single mindedly using what God has given you to increase His glory and expand His kingdom – in this way participate in suffering for the Gospel.

Next Paul gives the illustration of an athlete competing to get the prize.

In Paul's day the Olympics were still a major influence on athletics and there were a few rules that had to be observed in order to win. First you had to be born a Greek, second you had to train full time for a minimum of 10 months, and third you had to obey the rules of the event. If it was found you weren't born Greek or hadn't trained properly or didn't obey the rules you were disqualified.

In order to win a person had to submit themselves to these extreme riggers – so why would a person do this to themselves? Because of the glory of the prize! For the athletes the Olympics weren't about having fun – they ran to win.

And the picture is clear. Paul says a believer must first be born again – they must be a Christian by new birth. And then they must train themselves in matters of self-denial so that they might win the prize. Only because the prize is so great are the extremes of sacrifice acceptable.

Finally Paul gives the picture of a farmer. Here is a person who works to the point of exhaustion in hum-drum duty. Unlike a heroic soldier or a crowned athlete the farmer gets no glory. But he must plow and sow and tend and reap. Long days, early mornings. He must fight frost and heat and too much water and too little water and bugs and weeds. He must be patient. And if he is then he gets to enjoy the reward – the first crops.

And all three of these images – the soldier, the athlete and the farmer – give us the same picture. Christianity isn't a game. If you have been empowered by the grace of Christ Jesus it means you are a professional Christ follower – this is what you do.

There is no room in Christ for part time Christians. Just like there is no room for part time soldiers – sorry you can't shoot at me I'm off duty. Or part time NHL players or part time farmers. If you are in this thing, then you are in it for real because you are willing to participate with Christ by disciplining yourself to win the prize.

And this is the third command Paul gives us: first keep on being empowered by the grace of Christ Jesus, second share what you've experienced with others in a way that equips them to share what they've experienced with others. And now participate in suffering for the Gospel by fighting and competing and farming in a way that will win the prize.

Paul's final command comes in verse 7.

[Read 2 Timothy 2:7]

Paul says, be empowered by it, share it, participate in it and meditate on it: reflect or consider or think this over. Examine yourself in this matter to make sure what I'm describing here is you.

Ask Jesus am I doing this? Is this my experience? Is it evident that I have been empowered by the grace of Christ Jesus or is the reality that while I came to Christ at some point now I've slipped into pushing my car along instead of powering it with gas. I'm not really plugged into Christ and His grace anymore.

Paul calls us to question ourselves on this because everything is on the line. Remember Paul is writing his last will and testament. He doesn't want to get to heaven and find out that Timothy, who he invested himself in, ended up falling short. He wants Timothy to stand strong. And so he challenges him to ask himself these hard questions.

And he says with confidence "The Lord will give you insight into this." If you ask "Jesus am I on the right path? Am I living a life empowered by the Gospel, am I sharing what I've experienced with others, am I participating in suffering in order

to expand Your Kingdom? Paul says if we ask Jesus these questions He will give us insight into where we are at.

Now, if as you ask this and Jesus confirms to you “yes you are living empowered by grace and sharing what you’ve experienced and participating in My sufferings” then great! Continue in it.

But if you don’t get this confirmation then I urge you not to take that lightly – instead ask the Holy Spirit to bring His conviction which leads to repentance because while this will hurt it is so much better than the alternative.

Friends, following Jesus is not a game. And this is why Paul calls for soldiers and professional athletes and farmers – people who understand the sacrifice required in order to attain the prize. The question Paul leaves us with today is: Are you a professional Christ follower, someone who is in it full time, or have you tacked Christ on to your already busy life as a hobby?

Good soldier, this is not a game. The only way we will be able to stand in this is if we keep on allowing the grace of Christ Jesus to empower us.