

Strong Grace, Hard Work, Good Memories

II Timothy 2:1-9

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We have been working through the pastoral letters of Paul, I Timothy and Titus and II Timothy, and for the last month or so we have been in II Timothy, looking at the first chapter. Last week we said that Paul was giving Timothy and the Ephesian Christians, and us, marching orders for how to live and minister not only in a fallen world, but also in an imperfect church. We noted that beautiful section in which Paul speaks about the fact that so many of the Christians in Asia Minor that he had ministered to himself...he had drawn, been the instrument of God to draw to saving faith in Jesus Christ...had abandoned him. And yet he was encouraged by the faithfulness of Onesiphorus, who had sought him out in Rome, who had ministered to him when everybody else had fled. And he said that even in recounting that story, at the end of II Timothy, chapter one, that Paul was reminding Timothy that ministry in the church is ministry that is sure to meet with disappointment from the church. The church lets us down from time to time. We don't live and minister in a perfect church. We live and minister in an imperfect world and in an imperfect church, and so we drew encouragement even from Paul's story of the positive example and ministry of Onesiphorus and the sad example of so many of the saints in Asia Minor abandoning him in time of need.

Now he continues his exhortation to Timothy in the passage we're going to read today. If you look at verses 1 through 9, in fact, you'll see six things there that I would really love to take time and explore with you today, but I'm only going to get to three of them. Let me just tell you what the six are that I would have gotten to, had I had the time. And you'll see them in very short phrases: in verse 1, "be strong in grace." There's the first exhortation of Paul. We'll spend time on what that means as we study this passage today.

Then in verse 2, this challenge to Timothy to "entrust these..." - that is, these things which you have heard from me, "entrust these to faithful men." There's the second challenge. We won't have the opportunity to explore all that that means before us today, but here is Paul's exhortation to Timothy: to take the truth which has been given to him and to entrust it to other men, who will entrust that truth to still others.

We'll pause and meditate on what Paul is calling Timothy to here. In verses 4 to 6 he illustrates what he means when he says to Timothy, "Suffer hardship with

me...” using three Then, in verse 3: “Suffer hardship with me....” word pictures: the picture of a soldier, the picture of an athlete, and the picture of a peasant farmer working the soil.

Then in verse 7 you’ll see a fourth phrase: “Consider what I say....” Here he calls Timothy and us to hard thinking and meditation and reflection on the truth of the word of God...and again, we’ll skip over that particular phrase, but you can meditate on it yourself.

And then in verse 8, “Remember Jesus Christ....” This will be one of the three phrases that we’ll concentrate on as we study this great passage.

And then finally, if you look at the end of verse 9, this passing statement of confidence that Paul mentions to Timothy. Though Paul is in prison, he wants Timothy to remember that the word of God is not imprisoned.

We could spend a sermon on each of those phrases, but I want to look especially at these phrases: Be strong; suffer hardship; remember Jesus Christ, as we come to this passage today. So look for them as we read through this passage. Before we do, let's ask for God's help and blessing.

Heavenly Father, this is Your word. You have given it to us as a lamp to our feet and a light to our way. You mean it for our instruction. You mean it to equip us for every good work. You mean it to build us up into maturity in Jesus Christ. We acknowledge that every word of God is given by inspiration. We acknowledge that every last letter of Your holy Scriptures, the 66 books of the Holy Bible, is inspired; and we acknowledge that it is authoritative. We acknowledge that it is the final rule of our faith and life, and so we pray that we would listen to it today in that light. These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

2 Timothy 2:1-9

You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier. And also if any one competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules. The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops. Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything. Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel; for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal, but the word of God is not imprisoned.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, and inspired and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

“Be strong...suffer hardship...remember Jesus Christ.” Those are Paul's words of counsel to Timothy in a fallen world, in an imperfect church, facing many persecutions, many dangers, toils and snares, as he lives and ministers amongst the people of God. And those words were not only inspired words of counsel suitable for a minister of the gospel, but they were suitable for the living of the Christian life for all those in the Ephesian church who would have heard this letter read out loud, and those are suitable words for us. So I want us to take some time today to think about what Paul is saying in each of those phrases.

I. Be strong in the grace of Christ.

First of all, “Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” The very first thing that Paul tells Timothy here is that Christian life and ministry is a life, a ministry, a service of dependent responsibility. When you first hear those words, “Be strong in the grace of Christ,” and you think about them a bit, you may sense a contradiction. On the one hand, Timothy is being exhorted to strengthen himself, to be ready for vigorous, active service to the Lord. We could picture a cowboy in an old western movie telling his apprentice, “Cowboy up!”—to be strong, to be ready to take on the hardships of service. It's a call to personal exertion; it's a call to personal strength and to service of God; but Paul says “Be strong in the grace which is in Christ Jesus.” He's calling on Timothy to be ready to work and to work vigorously, but to do so utterly reliant upon the grace which is in Christ Jesus.

Timothy is not to summon up the strength which is natively within him and do the best he can, he is to be utterly dependent, utterly reliant, upon the grace which is in Christ Jesus. And in this exhortation we see a summation of a massive biblical truth: that all of the Christian life is a matter of dependent responsibility. Sometimes we live the Christian life as if God has saved us and now it's up to us. ‘The Lord saved me; the Lord saved me by His grace, now the rest is up to me.’

Other times we live the Christian life as if, ‘Well, the Lord's done it all. I just need to sit back, relax, let go and let God, because it's all about grace anyway, isn't it?’ And the Apostle Paul will never let us rest with either of those two incorrect attitudes, because they're unbiblical. The Apostle Paul wants us to work by grace, and so he exhorts Timothy and the Ephesians and you and me to “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”

In every aspect of the Christian life, whether we're worshiping, whether we're serving people that are a little bit hard to serve, whether we are attempting a challenging feat of ministry, we must simultaneously serve with every possible resource at our disposal engaged, and, at the same time, in utter, humble, dependent reliance upon God.

There is a nexus in every aspect of the Christian life in which we are called to be responsible and at the same time reliant upon the grace of God. Why? Because God is sovereign and we are responsible! That's the way that God has created this world. He is the sovereign ruler of this world, He is the sovereign ruler of His church, He supplies the church what she needs; but at the same time, He expects us to engage ourselves to the fullest of our energies for His purposes. And so, what God requires, He supplies. The prayer of Augustine captures it so beautifully: "Lord, command what You will, but give what You command." Lord, tell me to do anything You want me to do, but then enable me by Your grace, by Your supply, to do the things that You have called me to do. And so, the old Puritan motto in prayer was, "Pray and work."

Did you ever ask someone, "Would you consider serving in this capacity?" And their response was, "Well, I'll pray about it." Now, sometimes that can be genuinely pious, you understand, where there is a person very involved in the ministry of the church, and they're seeking to perceive whether this would be the place where the Lord would have them expend their energy; but, very often that is the favorite "put off" phrase for a Christian! "I'll pray about it," as if prayer were somehow a substitute for service in the church. But for the Puritans, because they were biblical they reminded us that prayer and work go hand in hand, because depending on God and serving God go hand in hand. And Paul is saying to Timothy here, "Be strong in the grace of Christ." Work by grace. Work in conscious dependence upon the grace of God. Work knowing that the gift of God is the instrument whereby He will make your work effective, but be strong in the grace of Christ. And this is a lesson that all of us need to be learned.

There was a man who had a small business, and it was a struggling small business. And he was just ahead of the creditors, and he would work day by day. He would work all day long, and he would come home and eat, and he would go back to the office. And when he wasn't working he was worrying or fretting about the company. He had many a sleepless night. Very often he didn't want to take vacation days or close the shop on holidays, because he thought he might lose business which otherwise would keep the doors open and pay the employees, and pay the taxes and put food on the table for the rest of the month. So he worked and he worked, but he never would rest, because as he worked he didn't trust that God would supply his need. He worked, but he wasn't strong in the grace of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, there was a woman who had a small business, and she worked hard. She went to work early, she stayed late. But when she came home, she stopped thinking about work. When a holiday came, she closed up shop. Didn't matter how much was needed to be brought in the next week before payroll had to be made. When it came vacation time, she sent the employees home, closed the shop up for a week, and they all spent the time off. She slept well at night. She worked hard, but she didn't worry and fret about what was

going on. She was working hard, but trusting God to supply what she couldn't make happen. She couldn't make new business come in the door. She couldn't guarantee what was going to happen tomorrow, but she worked hard, trusting God would supply.

Paul is calling on us to be strong—not in ourselves, but in the grace that is in Jesus Christ. What God requires, He supplies by His Spirit. And so He calls us to activity in the Christian life, and He promises us that He will supply the strength we need to do what He has called us to do. And so here is the first call of Paul to Timothy: “Be strong in the grace of Christ.”—and that in and of itself reminds us that the Christian life is not a life of laziness. It's not a life of leisure and ease; it's a life of work. And that, of course leads right into the very next thing that Paul says to us in this passage.

II. Suffer hardship with me.

Look with me at verse 3: “Suffer hardship with me,” Paul says to Timothy. He's reminding Timothy that Christian life and ministry expects hardship and embraces it.

You remember the surprising thing that we said last week about Paul's statement in verse 15, when he in passing says to Timothy, ‘Timothy, you're aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me.’ Remember, we said in studying that passage that that reminded us to expect to be disappointed in the Christian church.

Too many Christians are stunned and shocked when Christians in their own congregations let them down. They act as if it is a cataclysm unparalleled in human experience! It's never happened before, when the Christian church lets them down! And Paul is saying, ‘Timothy, I've been let down by everybody in Asia Minor! I led most of them to Christ. I started most of their churches. They let me down.’ And so a word of warning to Timothy: ‘Timothy, don't go into the Christian ministry thinking that the church is always going to come through for you.’

Well, here he's not speaking of an imperfect church; he's speaking about the natural hardships not only of Christian life in general, but of Christian ministry. And he says, ‘Here's a mindset I want you to have, Timothy. I want you to have a mindset that expects hardship. You're not surprised by it when it comes along. When building up the church turns out to be hard work, don't be discouraged by that. Certainly, Timothy, don't be surprised by that! Expect it, because the Christian life is a life of hardships. And Timothy, here's the attitude I want you to have: be ready to suffer with me. Have a mindset that expects hard work and suffering in gospel life and ministry.’

And that's so important for us. We live in an affluent society that cherishes its ease and comfort. And when hardship comes along, typically we are surprised by it. We say, 'Oh, something must be wrong. It's not supposed to be this way. It's supposed to be easy—the church is supposed to grow easy, the church is supposed to work easy, the Christian life is supposed to be easy. I'm supposed to become more godly, easy. And this hardship, I don't understand it. I don't know why this is happening to me.'

III. Reflect on my words.

The Apostle Paul says, 'Timothy, here's the mindset I want you to have: I want you to have the mindset of a soldier; I want you to have the mindset of an athlete; I want you to have the mindset of a farmer.' Look at verse 4, as he illustrates this point.

'I want you to have the mindset of a soldier.' In Paul's day, soldiers for the Roman army were recruited away from their jobs. They might be farmers, and they're recruited by a captain or a general into their service, and they're paid for while they're in the service of the Roman army, but they're not thinking about that farm that's back home. You remember Caesar saying to Maximus in *The Gladiator*—Russell Crowe saying to him, "How long have you been away from your wife and your home?" You remember Maximus' response? "Two years, 246 days, and this morning." His service of Caesar had taken him away from home for almost three years, but he suffered that hardship as a good soldier. And Paul is saying, 'Christian, be ready for the kind of sacrifices and hardships that are called for in the Christian life.'

Then he speaks of the athlete. You know, athletes in the ancient Greek games were required to come before the judges before the contest even started and swear to Zeus, and swear that they had been in training for at least ten months. This is probably what Paul means when he says that 'you can't win the prize unless you compete according to the rules.' And unless you can come and you can acknowledge that you have been in hard training for ten months, you can't even compete for the prize!

And then he speaks to the farmer. Before that farmer gets that yield he's got to break up the soil. He's got to prepare the soil, he's got to clear it of rocks, he's got to plant it, he's got to endure all the threats of weather; and then he receives his reward.

All of these images are images that Paul gives us to remind us of the sacrifice and the hard work that is part and parcel of the Christian life. Paul says to Timothy, 'Work hard and don't expect it to be easy.'

Remember when Shakespeare describes King Henry V of England, speaking to

his vastly outnumbered troops before the Battle of Agincourt? He was trying to get them to look at this thing from a different perspective. Instead of thinking, "Woe is me! Here we are, outnumbered by the French, sure to be slaughtered on this day..." He's trying to get them to look at their situation differently. And so he stands up and he gives this speech:

This day [he says] is called the feast of Crispin.
He that outlives this day and comes safe home
Will stand a-tiptoe when this day is named
And rouse him at the name of Crispin.
He that shall live this day and see old age
Will yearly on the vigil feast [of] his neighbors
Say, "Tomorrow is Saint Crispin."
Then he will strip his sleeve and show his scars,
And say, "These wounds I had on Crispin's Day."
Old men forget, yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember with advantages
What feats he did this day. Then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as household words,
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester,
Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered.
This story shall the good man teach his son,
And Crispin Crispin shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered—
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother. Be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition.
And gentlemen in England now abed
Shall think themselves accursed there were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's Day.

You see what he's saying: he's saying, 'We will glory in the fact that we're here to fight this fight. And those who are not here to fight it with us, well, they'll curse the day that they weren't here to go through this trial.' He changes their mindset about how to look at this battle.

And Paul is saying to Timothy, 'Timothy, embrace that hardship!' We said last week that when we are called to experience the wounds of an imperfect church, we should in this affluent, prosperous society as Christians, quickly embrace that opportunity to endure the hurt of an imperfect church, because we have so few trials relative to our Christian brothers and sisters around this world. So also we should embrace the hardships that the Lord brings our way in the Christian life.

Perhaps the Lord teaches us to trust in the most difficult of ways, setting His finger upon the one we love the most and removing that one from us. Perhaps the Lord teaches us to serve the Lord Jesus Christ at great personal cost and expense. We should quickly embrace these hardships of the Christian life, and Paul is saying to Timothy, 'Don't expect it to be easy. Suffer hardship with me.'

One British sailor took for his motto, *Disce pati* — “learn to suffer.” That's a Pauline motto, as he calls on Timothy and you and me to be prepared to suffer hardship in the Christian life and ministry.

IV. Remember Christ Jesus.

And then he says to Timothy in verse 8, one last thing: “Remember Christ Jesus.” Be strong in the grace of Christ Jesus. Suffer hardship with me. Remember Christ Jesus. He's reminding Timothy that the Christian life and the Christian ministry, Christian service, is based on the person of Christ, on the work of Christ, and on the truth of Christ. He's calling on Timothy to remember the One who is truth and life, and this exhortation is so relevant. You know, within four decades of Paul's death—he died somewhere in the '60's of the first century—and within four decades, you would not believe the crazy kinds of things that were being taught in Christian churches planted by Paul and Timothy and John and Peter and the other apostles. There were people who were attempting to teach that Jesus was not a descendent of David; that Jesus was not bodily raised from the dead. In other words, they were preaching a Jesus of their own imagination, and so Paul says, 'Timothy, you remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended of David, according to my gospel'—not because Paul had invented Jesus, but because Paul had been called by Jesus to be a proclaimer of His gospel, and he had proclaimed the truth about Jesus. And he's saying, 'Timothy, you remember Jesus Christ as He is. You remember Him as He's taught in the Bible. You remember Him in accordance with the Scripture: the One who is the anointed, the descendent of David, the One who was raised again from the dead in His own body.'

My friends, that's important for us today, because it seems like everywhere you go there's someone who wants to say, “I like to think of Jesus as....” —and whatever follows “as” is heresy! “I like to think of Jesus as...” —whatever it will be, it will contradict everything the Bible says about it. That Jesus won't save you; that Jesus of your imagination won't save you. Only the Jesus of the gospel will save you. Only Jesus Christ as He is offered, as He is set forth in Scripture: crucified, dead and buried, raised again on the third day. That's the Savior of the world, that's the One in whose name no one under heaven and earth can be saved apart from.

Now Paul says to Timothy, and to you and me, 'Be strong in grace. Live this life

in dependent responsibility. Be ready to suffer hardship. Don't be surprised when hardship comes into your life. And whatever you do, remember Jesus Christ, preached according to Paul's gospel.'

Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, these words of counsel are not simply wise human words, they are Your Spirit's word for the church. We pray then that by Your Spirit that we would understand them, we would meditate upon them; that we would embrace them in our own experience, and that we would then be good soldiers of the Lord Jesus Christ, ready to take up our cross and follow the Savior. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Grace be with you. Amen.

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