

“Strength for Ministry”
2 Timothy 2:1-13
March 3, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

Today is a special day in the life of our congregation as we ordain and install Blake Harris as our Assistant Pastor. He is being ordained as a Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church in America. As that title suggests, one of his primary callings is to teach and preach the Word of God, to believers and unbelievers alike. Gospel preaching has always required strength that is beyond our abilities. Paul told Timothy to “be strengthened” for the simple reason that those ministering the gospel have always been in need of power from God.

Our denominational standards say that I am to preach a sermon suited to the occasion, and I have chosen this passage out of 2 Timothy to satisfy this requirement. The reason for choosing this passage is because of this theme of strength for ministry. All Christians wanting to love their neighbors with the good news of the gospel will discover their need for strength. So let’s consider how Paul writes of this need and how it can be met in our lives.

I. Why Do We Need Strengthening?

Christians in general, and ministers in particular, need strengthening because following Christ always involves suffering. Timothy was unprepared for such suffering and that is the major theme of Paul’s letter to him. If you read 1 and 2 Timothy together, it becomes clear that 1 Timothy addresses a problem in the church Timothy pastored, while 2 Timothy addresses a problem in Timothy’s life. His problem was being unprepared for suffering.

Perhaps Timothy was caught off guard by the suffering of his mentor, Paul. These were dark times for Paul. He is imprisoned in Rome, awaiting a second hearing. At his first hearing, no one came to his defense (4:16). There were massive defections from the churches Paul had labored to establish throughout Asia (1:15). Even one of Paul’s co-workers, a man named Demas, had deserted him (4:10). False teaching was a growing problem in the church, and many were succumbing to it (2:17-18). And all this was happening at the end of Paul’s life. Paul expected to die in prison (4:6).

So Paul wants Timothy to know that suffering is normal for the Christian. So he tells him to **“share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus”** (v. 3). I think the church in America today needs this message. In his book

Christless Christianity, Michael Horton describes a mailer he saw that was sent out by a new church to invite people to attend their services.

Hi Neighbor! At last! A new church for those who have given up on church services! Let's face it. Many people aren't active in church these days. Why? Too often the sermons are boring and don't relate to daily living. Many churches seem more interested in your wallet than in you. Members are unfriendly to visitors. You wonder about the quality of the nursery care for your little ones. Do you think attending church should be enjoyable? WELL, WE'VE GOT GOOD NEWS FOR YOU! Valley Church is a new church designed to meet your needs... At Valley Church you... hear positive, practical messages which uplift you each week. How to feel good about yourself;... how to have a full and successful life;... how to overcome stress... Why not get a lift instead of a letdown this Sunday (p. 48).

That sounds very different from Paul's advice to Timothy to "share in suffering as a good soldier." We suffer because that is part of love. To love another is to be willing to suffer for their sake. That's why Paul says "**I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory**" (v. 10). We are not asked to seek out suffering, but to endure it when God brings it our way.

A second reason why we need strength is related. It is the constant opposition of evil to the Word of God. From the very beginning, when Satan challenged God's word to Adam and Eve, the word of God has been under attack. Paul was in prison because of his faithfulness to God's word. It is still the case that those who remain faithful to God's word will suffer for it. We have seen that just this past week in the response to the courageous stand taken by the United Methodist Church in a worldwide gathering of their leaders in St. Louis. The purpose of the meeting was to decide what the church's practices would be regarding sexual ethics. The decision was made to maintain the position that has always been the case with the church because it is clearly the position of the Bible: that sexual activity is permitted only within a committed marriage between a man and a woman. The outrage, name-calling and mischaracterization against those who have taken this stand has now begun in earnest.

Notice, though, Paul's confidence in God's word. "**I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!**" (v. 9). The enemies of God cannot touch the word of God, so they go after the servants of God who boldly declare God's word. That's why Paul was suffering in prison, and why Timothy can expect the same. It is possible to limit one's suffering through compromise, but the servant of God must never do so. One of the applications of this is not to lose our confidence in the word of God. It is the power of God to accomplish his good purposes, not bound by any human or satanic opposition. I have been around long enough to witness several attacks on God's word, both from outside the church and from within. Those outside

the church tells us that we are narrow-minded and old-fashioned if we take the Bible as God's infallible word. We are told repeatedly, "No one has the right to tell others what to believe, so you should never try to convert anyone." Of course, this statement itself is contradictory because the one making it is trying to convert us into those committed to not converting. Nonetheless, this remains a strong and powerful challenge to being faithful to God's word today.

Those inside the church tell us that in our entertainment culture, we need to make an effort to add some entertainment value to God's word. Preachers need to throw in some movie clips in their sermons, tell more funny or moving stories. Others inside the church want to replace God's word with the insights from modern psychology. I could go on and on listing the enemies of God's word. It is a "wack-a-mole" situation where another challenge is always raising its head. The faithful Christian must not attempt to relieve suffering by compromising the word of God. Rather, we are to maintain our confidence in this word and be faithful to it.

II. What Does Strengthening Look Like?

Paul uses three metaphors in explaining to Timothy his behavior as a servant of God: a soldier, an athlete and a farmer. He draws at least one implication from each metaphor. The central feature of the soldier is obedience to his commanding officer. Soldiers have drilled into their heads the need to obey orders, even if they don't understand those orders or disagree with them. An entire mission can be ruined by one soldier who fails to follow orders. Lives depend upon it. Paul says that is the way God's servants should be. Our number one priority should be obedience to our commanding officer, Jesus. The life of the soldier is always organized around the mission given to him. He doesn't fit the mission in with civilian priorities, but fits civilian needs in with the mission. It is to be the same for all Christians.

The second metaphor is the athlete, who must compete according to the rules. Why might an athlete be tempted to violate the rules in a competition? It is the temptation to gain his goal by taking a shortcut. If I wanted to win the Boston Marathon, there's only one way I could do so. About a mile into the race, I would have to call an Uber ride and have it take me to within a mile of the finish line. Of course, such a shortcut would disqualify me from the prize. There are shortcuts we are tempted to take in ministry, too. Many pastors have been disqualified from ministry through plagiarism of their sermons. I have also witnessed those who have taken the shortcut of intimacy with someone other than a wife, or with a pornographic image on a screen. Shortcuts promise quick results while serving only to bring down a ministry. The truth is that it is through the patient and faithful disciplines of prayer, Bible study and loving fellowship that ministry must proceed.

The third metaphor is the farmer, who reveals the need for hard work and patience. Farmers are well-known as hard workers. There is always something that needs doing, whether it's planting season, growing season, harvest season or in-between season. Similarly, those who minister God's word must also be hard workers. It's not a forty-hour per week job. Nights, vacations and off-days can all be interrupted by the demands of ministry. Like the farmer, too, ministry to others requires patience. Crops, just like people, take time to grow. Sometimes it looks like nothing is happening. Farmers don't grow discouraged. They just keep on doing what they can do and leave the rest up to God.

There are many more implications of these three metaphors, so Paul tells Timothy to explore them further. **“Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything”** (v. 7). Paul's advice here reveals two necessary ingredients to all Bible study: thinking and trusting God. Paul tells Timothy to devote some thinking energy to this. The mind must be engaged if we are to understand God's word. Such things as grammar, literary interpretation and word meanings are all necessary parts of Bible study. But we must also depend on the Lord for understanding.

III. How Are We Strengthened?

The first verse of our text provides a clear answer to this question. **“Be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”** Notice that this verb is in the passive voice. It doesn't say, “Be strong,” as if the strength were to be generated from within us. Strength for ministry and its attendant suffering comes from outside of us. It comes through “the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” The grace of God means that I don't get what I deserve, which is eternal condemnation for my sins. Instead, I get what Jesus deserves, which is eternal blessings. Or as Martin Luther said in a quote I mentioned last week, “When I look at myself, I don't see how I can be saved. But when I look at Christ, I don't see how I can be lost.”

How does the grace that is in Christ Jesus strengthen us for ministry? It does so by giving us a foundation of love and acceptance. To know that you are loved by God means that you don't have to be desperate to gain it from others. You are free to love others instead of using others.

The final three verses of our text provide us with a basic summary of Paul's teaching about God's grace. This is what Paul had told Timothy up in the well-known second verse to **“entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”** He introduces his summary with the phrase, **“the saying is trustworthy.”** Paul uses that phrase to quote something that was a common theological understanding. He is simply adding his endorsement. Perhaps these sayings (this is the fifth one in 1 and 2 Timothy) were part of early Christian hymns. In any case, they seem to be widely accepted.

The first sentence of his saying describes our union with Christ by faith. **“If we have died with him, we will also live with him.”** When Jesus died on the cross, there is a sense in which we were there. He is our representative, and as our representative he went through hell for us that we might be delivered from it. Like most pastors I know, I sometimes receive hate mail. I received one recently where the sender was angry about a position I took on a matter, and in response he predicted that I would spend an eternity in hell. Words like that can have an impact. I found myself strengthened, though, when I remembered the grace of God as seen in this statement. By faith, I have died with Christ. It is true that I deserve hell, but I have already been there in my representative, Christ. Now, I am also with Christ in his resurrection, so that I will live with him, too. In George Herbert’s great poem, “The Sacrifice,” he writes of Jesus’ death on the cross by referring to the tree of life from the Garden of Eden. In a masterful stroke, he refers to the cross as our new tree of life. He has Jesus speak these words: “Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the tree; The tree of life to all, but only me.”

Notice these last two lines of the saying. They seem to contradict one another. The first one is clearly a warning. **“If we deny him, he also will deny us.”** To deny Christ is the opposite of confessing him. It means that we turn away from the faith and renounce Christ. While a person might deny Christ openly and verbally, it is also possible to deny him simply by trusting in your own good works for salvation instead of trusting in Christ. In that case, Jesus will essentially let a person have what he wants. But on the day of judgment when it will be revealed that his good works fall far short of what is required, Jesus will not stand up for him.

The next verse seems to say just the opposite. **“If we are faithless, he remains faithful.”** How do we reconcile these two? I think it is clear that to be faithless is different than denying Christ. It means that we lose our grip on Christ. The text is saying that even if we should lose our hold on Christ, he is faithful and will not lose his grip on us. Charles Spurgeon said it like this. “My faith rests not in what I am, or shall be, or feel, or know, but in what Christ is, in what He has done and in what He is now doing for me.”

CONCLUSION:

So be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Living the Christian life, serving as a minister of the gospel, is more like a jet airplane than a glider. The glider can stay aloft for a long time with no power. But the jet will immediately begin losing altitude if all the power from the jet engines is lost. The jet needs a continual source of power if it is to stay aloft. We do too, and we have it in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

Small Group Discussion Questions
2 Timothy 2:1-13

1. What do you find to be most challenging about speaking to non-believers about the good news of Christ?
2. In a recent article, Tim Keller identified three common reasons Christians don't speak out for Christ. (1) talking about the Christian faith is more *complicated* because we no longer have a consensus about a personal God, an afterlife, moral absolutes, heaven and hell and a basic respect for the Bible; (2) talking about the Christian faith is more *difficult* because it is no longer widely accepted that Christianity is a good thing for society. There is now anger toward institutions in general and the church in particular, especially if that church holds to traditional views of human sexuality; and (3) there is a widespread belief in our culture that no one has the right to tell others what to believe, so you shouldn't be trying to convert anyone. Which of these statements do you most identify with?
3. Paul believed that the strength to overcome all these obstacles is found in "the grace that is in Christ Jesus." How would you describe to an interested non-believer this idea of "the grace that is in Christ Jesus"?
4. How does God's grace strengthen us? How have you experienced that empowering aspect of God's grace?
5. One of the reasons Timothy needed strengthening was the suffering of his mentor, Paul. Review the sufferings of Paul revealed just in this letter. Here's a quote from the sermon manuscript about that:
He is imprisoned in Rome, awaiting a second hearing. At his first hearing, no one came to his defense (4:16). There were massive defections from the churches Paul had labored to establish throughout Asia (1:15). Even one of Paul's co-workers, a man named Demas, had deserted him (4:10). False teaching was a growing problem in the church, and many were succumbing to it (2:17-18). And all this was happening at the end of Paul's life. Paul expected to die in prison (4:6).
If you were Timothy, what effect would these sufferings of Paul have had on you? How does the grace of God answer this challenge?
6. In verse 9, Paul says that even though he is bound with chains, the word of God is not bound. Paul had great confidence in God's Word to accomplish God's purposes. What can you do to encourage such confidence in God's word?
7. Explore the three metaphors of verses 3-6 for God's servants (soldier, athlete and farmer) and do what verse 7 encourages: think over them and trust the Lord for understanding. List some applications from these.