

During the season of Pentecost our focal point is about what it means to follow Jesus. This morning we're going to study what St. Paul wrote to Timothy about this, using the images of soldier, athlete, and farmer.

PRAYER

2 TIMOTHY 2:1-13

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus,² and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

³ Share in suffering as a good SOLDIER of Christ Jesus. ⁴ No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. ⁵ An ATHLETE is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. ⁶ It is the hard-working FARMER who ought to have the first share of the crops. ⁷ Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

⁸ Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my Gospel,⁹ for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the Word of God is not bound! ¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

¹¹ The saying is trustworthy, for,
If we have died with Him,
we will also live with Him;
¹² if we endure,
we will also reign with Him;
if we deny Him,
He also will deny us;
¹³ if we are faithless,
He remains faithful,
for He cannot deny Himself.

Paul encourages Timothy, a young pastor, who is confronting all kinds of issues in his parish, providing him with three images which he can easily learn and share with others, that is the metaphors of a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer.

Paul began, writing, 2 Timothy 2:1-2, You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus,² and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

Paul was saying, lean into God's grace, and hold fast to it. Call on the Lord, and rely on his promises to save and protect and help you. You've already been blessed. Now claim that blessing as your own. And then Paul says, take what you've learned and share it, give it away! Grace the people around you with the love of God that they may follow your example and walk in this same faith.

With this introduction, Paul continued with the 3-images of the soldier, athlete, and farmer. He wrote, **2 Timothy 2:3-7, Share in suffering as a good SOLDIER of Christ Jesus. ⁴ No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. ⁵ An ATHLETE is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. ⁶ It is the hard-working FARMER who ought to have the first share of the crops. ⁷ Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.**

Paul began this teaching with the command, "Share in suffering," as in "share in suffering as a good soldier," as "an athlete," and as a "hard-working farmer." Let's think about it like this: Whenever we start something new, suffering is involved. Whether the new work includes learning new things, becoming disciplined in new work habits, setting new goals, taking on new responsibilities, whatever we're called to do involves breaking forth from our natural state of inertia.

The new jobs Paul was talking about here are not easy kinds of work. They each include lots of self-discipline and self-motivation. A lazy soldier dies in battle; a lazy athlete can't win a tournament; a lazy farmer doesn't harvest a good crop, and his family goes hungry. We were given the love of God through Jesus for free—saved by grace through faith, indeed. However, growing in this faith, increasing in wisdom and good works involves suffering, indeed.

For example, I workout several times a week. Honestly, I don't do this because it's fun. I hate working out! I'd rather drink coffee and read a book than row, squat, and do pull-ups like a monkey! I exercise because I'm afraid of what will happen to my body if I don't! And so I suffer. I psyche myself up, constantly reminding myself of the benefits so that I can keep on going.

The first metaphor Paul uses for the work of the Christian is the "soldier." Paul wrote, "No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him."

Two things: First, the one who has "enlisted" us is Jesus. As such he counts us as one of his own; he's depending on us. He explains his battle plans, and we fulfill them. We don't

argue with God; we don't pummel him with questions; we just do it. And second, don't become "entangled in civilian pursuits."

For a soldier "civilian pursuits" are things that have nothing to do with being a soldier, anything which would make one unfit for service or doing something which might disqualify one from being a soldier, like breaking the law.

"Civilian pursuits" for the Christian "soldier" are things we would do if we were still in the world, a world without hope, a world without light, things like participating in self-destructive behavior; gossiping and backbiting; hating our neighbor; worrying; stealing; and lying. In sum, doing anything which would detract from our witness to the eternal Gospel that saved us.

This fall one of the greatest challenges for Christians is the presidential election. God help us if our ranting and raving about our political ideology, one of our most ugly "civilian pursuits," should detract from our witness to the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

The Lord has given each one of us a conscience, which he speaks to. Do we listen to him? When we are involved in "civilian pursuits" which detract from our ability to follow orders from the Lord Most High, we feel it in our mind and heart. In other words, we know when we've gone AWOL! And we need to get after that.

For myself, my conscience speaks to me when I've wronged another person, and it isn't okay until I make things right. My conscience speaks to me when I've started to push my agenda a little too hard in my home and in my work, and it won't let me go until I give everything back to Jesus. My conscience speaks to me when I've become filled with worry and concern for things over which I have no control, and I can't ignore it until I relinquish those things to the care of my Lord and Savior Jesus, and I ask Him to forgive me for not trusting Him.

Soldiers of the Cross, how is your conscience speaking to you? Don't ignore it! God is probably trying to get your attention!

The second metaphor Paul wrote about was the athlete. He wrote that "An ATHLETE is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules."

The focal point of the text here is "the rules." The rules for an athlete have to do with how one plays the game and the things that one may not do on and off the field. When I first played basketball as a very young boy I remember one of the first rules that most everyone broke multiple times in the beginning was to not carry the ball across the floor.

“You mean I have to bounce this thing all the way across to the other side?!” Yes! That’s the rule!

So what are “the rules” for the Christian athlete? We could easily make a list of moral rules from the Bible, but I want to keep this very practical. Here are my rules for being a Christian athlete. First rule: don’t destroy your fellow teammates! How often have Christians attacked Christians through gossip? Another rule is that we keep Jesus first, not promoting ourselves, but making Jesus first and foremost in our witness to the world. And my third rule is that we must keep the Bible front and center. Do we know what the Lord actually said? How can we speak on his behalf if we don’t know his book?

The 3rd metaphor of Paul is the farmer. He wrote, “It is the hard-working FARMER who ought to have the first share of the crops.” I remember my uncle harvesting hay. It sounded simple. After all, harvesting hay is kind of like mowing your lawn. But when you’re looking at 500 acres of hay, you’re talking about a project that’s something more than a chore you complete on a Saturday morning! My uncle and his sons were out in the field for weeks. They were working against the clock, watching for rain, mowing, baling, and loading. And sleep? Sleep is for sissies in this game! Likewise Paul describes the farmer as “hard-working.”

Jesus said, **Luke 10:2: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”**

Friends in Christ, we’re all farmers: We all live in the midst of a crop which the Lord has called us to harvest, that is, a broken world which longs for salvation. But, again, harvesting is hard-work. For example, my uncle doesn’t harvest his fields of hay by sleeping in and praying that they will harvest themselves! He has to get out there, bust tail, and do it himself. So too we harvest on behalf of the Lord with hard work.

Our work in the fields of broken hearts is to share with people what God has done for us. This is not complicated, but it does involve sticking our necks out a little. After all, people might not think we’re cool if we tell them that we follow Jesus. But we each have a story. It may be something as simple as, “Jesus gives me peace in my heart as I walk with him.” Please say it with me. (“Jesus gives me peace in my heart as I walk with him.”)

That’s a message worth sharing with our families, friends, and co-workers, a message which Paul summarizes with these words here in his letter to Timothy: **2 Timothy 2:8-10, Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my Gospel, ⁹ for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the Word of God**

is not bound! ¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, Jesus rose from the grave on the 3rd day, fulfilling all of the promises of God concerning forgiveness of sins, redemption of the earth, and life eternal in his glory, promises rooted in “the Word of God (that) is not bound”! A Word that is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

This is our hope, this is our grace, this is the mighty hand of God which has reached down through the darkness and lifted us up into his light, his “eternal glory.”

St. Paul finished this part of his letter to Timothy with a poem:

2 Timothy 2:11-13

¹¹ The saying is trustworthy, for,
 If we have died with Him,
 we will also live with Him;
¹² if we endure,
 we will also reign with Him;
if we deny Him,
 He also will deny us;
¹³ if we are faithless,
 He remains faithful,
 for He cannot deny Himself.

We’ve learned here that if we die with Jesus – if we’re buried with Him in Baptism as the Scriptures say – we will live with Him forever. And we’ve also learned that “if we endure,” if we keep the faith, we will “reign” with him in the Kingdom of God. Alleluia!

In this poem Paul also provides a warning and a promise, bad news-good news, God’s law and God’s Gospel: First, he says, “if we deny (Jesus), He also will deny us.” This means that God doesn’t make anyone go to heaven who doesn’t want to be there. That’s what freewill is all about.

On the other hand – and this is why we’re in church this morning – Paul says, “if we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.” I’m glad he said this, a lot! For if he hadn’t, I’m afraid that I may have come to believe that if I ever made a mistake, if I failed as a soldier, was a mediocre athlete, became nothing more than a dirt farmer,

then I was out in the cold! But here Paul says the opposite. Even when we sin, even when we're "faithless," God is still our Lord. Jesus' blood and resurrection are that big, that powerful, that mighty.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week may you be encouraged in your pursuit of the things of God, knowing that he claimed you as his son, his daughter even before the stars were born.

This weeks may you be encouraged to suffer for the sake of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus as a good soldier, a strong athlete, and a hard working farmer, freely sharing with others the work God has done in your heart.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share this good news with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of the Lord. Amen.