

Handle God's Word Rightly

Scripture Text: 2 Timothy 2:1-15.

Devotional Reading: Psalm 119:9-16 **Background Scripture:** 2 Timothy 2

TIME: About A.D. 64 **PLACE:** from Rome

2 Timothy 2:1-15

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. ² And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. ³ Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. ⁴ No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer. ⁵ Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules. ⁶ The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. ⁷ Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.

⁸ Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, ⁹ for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. ¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

¹¹ Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; ¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; ¹³ if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

¹⁴ Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. ¹⁵ Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

LESSON AIMS

The aims of today's lesson are to:

- Describe the example set by a good soldier, athlete, or farmer, as explained in today's text.
- Tell how regular Bible study can help the believer to demonstrate the qualities typified by soldiers, athletes, and farmers.
- Identify one obstacle he or she will overcome in order to be faithful in studying God's Word.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Second Timothy was the last epistle Paul wrote that is part of the canon of Scripture. It was written while he sat in a Roman prison awaiting his execution (4:6,7). These facts give his words to Timothy an added sense of urgency and seriousness. Impending death tends to focus the mind on the things that matter the most.

Two of the things that clearly mattered a great deal to Paul were living with the right priorities and being a faithful proclaimer of God's Word. He had learned from hard experience that the Christian life, though filled with great blessings, was nevertheless a hard struggle. He wanted Timothy to bear up under the hardships and not lose sight of what his purpose on this earth was.

In the midst of life's battles, the Word of God is the believer's stronghold, so Paul was especially concerned that Timothy handle and teach it properly. The Christian life is hard enough under the best of circumstances; it is well-nigh impossible without a proper grounding in God's inspired revelation to His people.

Timothy had learned of faith from his mother and grandmother. He had learned the fullness of the Christian gospel from Paul himself. Timothy had shared Paul's hardships. Many were deserting the gospel (2 Timothy 1:15; 4:10a), but not Timothy.

The conviction of truth undoubtedly was what kept Timothy faithful. In this lesson we will see how Paul admonished Timothy to make sure that truth is passed on regardless of personal consequences. The stakes were just too high to do otherwise.

Paul's exhortations to Timothy concerning single-mindedness and fidelity to God's Word remain very relevant to us today. Let us resolve to take his instructions to heart.

Laboring for the Truth (2 Timothy 2:1-7)

Paul knew that Timothy had a godly heritage and had been called by God's grace (1:5,9). Paul had also experienced the pain of having people forsake him and his ministry (v. 15). He "therefore"(you then) (2:1) encouraged Timothy to grow ever stronger in preparation for what he might have to face.

Paul called Timothy his "son." This may be evidence that Paul was the one who had led him to faith, or it may simply be a reference to a mentoring role. In either case (or, of course, if both are true), he clearly took a great personal interest in Timothy's welfare.

1. How did Paul encourage Timothy in the faith (2 Timothy 2:1)?

Above all things, Paul was concerned that the message of salvation be preserved and passed on. There could be no question about the content of Paul's teaching. He had taught the truth repeatedly and in front of many people. Timothy was to take this clear message and entrust it to men who could be counted on to proclaim it faithfully themselves and in turn entrust it to other godly men (1:14). In this way the church would survive even as the Apostle Paul passed off the scene.

2. What was Timothy to do to ensure the church would survive the passing of Paul (v. 2)?

Scripture makes it clear that the Christian life involves warfare. The world, the flesh, and the devil are all opposed to Christians and their message. That is why Paul told the Ephesians to put on the "whole armor of God" (Eph. 6:13; c.f. vs. 12-17).

No one knows "suffering" (or hardship) like a soldier, particularly soldiers in the ancient world. Paul has learned much about a soldier's life since he has spent considerable time in the company of soldiers while in prison. Conditions "on the road" are tough, and the soldiers are away from home for long periods of time. Add to that the threat of death, and you recognize the extraordinary commitment of the soldier.

God's men and women are to have that same kind of commitment. We are all soldiers for the cause of Christ (Philippians 2:25; Philemon 2). Paul knew that through faith and hope, Timothy could hold up under all that he might suffer (2 Cor. 4:8-18). He could know that the final victory would be his.

Continuing the analogy between soldiering and the Christian ministry, Paul noted that a warrior on active duty could not perform his task if he was preoccupied and taken up with civilian matters. In the midst of battle or impending battle, the soldier's attention must be entirely on the work at hand. This alone will satisfy his superior officer. Likewise the Christian worker pleases God only when his heart and mind are fully engaged in doing the work God has given him.

3. How is the Christian life like that of a soldier (vs. 3,4)?

Let's be specific as we think about this. Perhaps one has chosen a career path that has brought her less wealth but more time to be involved in ministry or family.

Maybe another has volunteered to share his expertise in computers with others in the church when he could have used that time as a consultant and generated more income. There may be some who grew up in homes where immorality and pursuit of pleasure were prevalent and, except for finding the Lord, would likely have followed the same path.

All of us face various health, marital, and family problems. Are there some who faced such difficulties with a faith and courage they might not have had unless they had been keeping themselves pure and "unentangled"?

4. We all know Christians who are entangled "civilian affairs." How is your life different because of your faith? How have you kept yourself from worldly entanglements?

Paul next called on two other occupations to illustrate the Christian ministry. In verse 5 he referred to the efforts of an

athlete. The phrase "*competes as an athlete*" refers to competing in an athletic contest. Paul may well have had in mind the Olympic-like competitions of ancient Greece. The winner in these competitions would be "crowned" with a laurel wreath or perhaps a gold-plated imitation of one (Hendricksen, Thessalonians, Timothy, and Titus, Baker).

To say that the competitors must "*competes according to the rules*" means they must compete according to the established rules. This could refer to the rules of training, but more likely it means the rules of the competition itself. The Christian must also always be aware of his or her commitment to the rules of the Lord. Just because we have been saved by grace does not mean we are free to ignore the moral laws of God. We still live under authority.

Dedicated hard work is also involved in the analogy Paul made to agricultural life (v. 6). The farmer who works hard deserves a leading share of what he produces. Likewise, God would reward Timothy with great spiritual blessings as he faithfully toiled in God's field. As with the warrior and the athlete, the farmer's single-mindedness brings good things.

Paul also told Timothy to carefully reflect on what he had said about the single-minded pursuit of his ministry (v. 7). As he did this, God would help him see the significance of these analogies.

God gives us the understanding that we need to grow in grace and fulfill our responsibilities, but this verse teaches us that He still expects us to do the work of carefully thinking and reflecting on His Word. Our minds as well as our hearts are to be engaged in the pursuit of knowing God and His ways. As we do this, His Spirit will guide us.

5. What other occupations did Paul mention to explain the nature of the Christian ministry (vs. 5-7)?

Suffering for the Truth (2 Timothy 2:8-13)

In order to effectively serve God, Timothy needed to keep in mind the foundational truths of the faith. At the heart of our faith is the good news ("gospel") of Christ's resurrection.

Why did Paul think it important to mention here that Christ is "*descended from David*"? The significance is that Christ is the rightful Heir of the great kingdom promises made to David (2 Sam. 7:11-16; Acts 2:29-36). In the midst of the hardships and persecutions that Timothy might face, he was to look to the fact that he served not only a living Savior but also a risen King.

This is the truth that Paul had received, proclaimed, and held fast to in the midst of trial and even now as he faced the prospect of death. It could sustain Timothy as well. After all, Paul's gospel was Timothy's gospel.

6. Why did Paul mention that Christ was descended from David (v. 8)?

Paul points out that in his own situation he is being persecuted as a criminal for his faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 16:23; Ephesians 3:1; Philippians 1:12-14). As in the case of Jesus, Paul is treated as a criminal even though he has committed no crime.

Yet Paul can see that even though he himself is chained; the gospel goes on unchained. What a perspective! Time after time people have tried to silence truth by silencing the messenger. It does not work. God's message is far more powerful than any earthly messenger. God's truth can never be imprisoned.

God's Word, which is "sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4:12). As the Lord declared through Isaiah, "My word .. shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please" (55:11).

Because of his confidence in the efficacy of God's Word and because of his love for God's people. Paul was willing to endure anything (2 Tim. 2:10). The realization that our efforts are truly worth something and will certainly be used by a sovereign God for the benefit of others has a great motivating power.

Paul knew that God had chosen a people for Himself and that He would save the elect spoken of here through His Word. He saves people by His own power and grace, but He has also chosen the means for accomplishing His purpose. That means is the presentation of the gospel message.

7. Why was Paul willing to endure anything for the gospel (vs. 9,10)?

As he did in 1 Timothy (1:15), Paul sometimes spoke of a *"trustworthy saying."* This means a truth upon which a person can reliably build his life. These three verses contain a series of four "if" clauses. The basic thrust of these clauses is the importance of fidelity to Christ.

The first "if" clause points to the reward if we suffer the ultimate earthly penalty for our faith-physical death. If we are suffering for Christ now, even if we are put to death for our testimony, we know that we will still live forever with Him.

Implicit in this willingness to die is the recognition that a believer has already died spiritually with Christ and is therefore steadfastly putting to death his worldly desires in order to live for Christ (Rom. 6:3,4; Phil. 3:10). In light of this the Christian should be ready to die physically for his Lord (2 Cor. 4:10), remembering that just as Christ rose from the dead after His suffering, so shall he.

The second "if" clause (2 Tim. 2:12) is somewhat parallel to the first, but it expands upon it. Not only will the believer experience eternal life, but he will also reign with Christ in glory. The thing that makes salvation so special and worth suffering for is that it brings glory-and not just glory of a temporary nature. The glory we will enjoy in perfect righteousness as we reign with Christ will last forever.

This is not glory of the self-aggrandizing kind that we see so much of in the world but a pure enjoyment of God's perfections as we live free from the presence of sin (2 Cor. 3:18; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2).

The third clause, also in verse 12, introduces the negative side of the importance of loyalty to Christ. If we fail to maintain our confession of Him, He in turn will not acknowledge us. If a professing believer does not repent of his sin (as Peter did) and persists in a life of denying Christ, this is an indication that he was never truly regenerated-he will face God's judgment (1Tim. 4:1; 2 John 1:9).

The final "if" clause in verse 13 teaches that God will remain faithful to His promises of judgment if a professing believer departs from the faith. He will not be untrue to who He is by letting the person who denies Him go unjudged.

Bible-believing scholars differ in their interpretation of the last of the four "if" clauses (2 Tim. 2:13). Nevertheless, the context of the first pair of "if" clauses have a similar meaning, and so it seems likely that the writer would structure the second pair in the same way. This interpretation also fits the context better, driving home the importance of faithful teaching and obedience.

8. Why should a believer be prepared even to give up his life in God's service (vs. 11-13)?

Contending for Truth (2 Timothy 2:14,15)

The momentous facts of verses 11-13 are of such importance that it is foolish to get involved and strive about insignificant words to no profit (see v. 14). A faithful pastor will keep reminding those he teaches to do the same.

Trivial matters such as the color of the carpet or the walls in the sanctuary have split more than one church! Matters of personal preference, whether related to music style, kitchen equipment, the name for an adult Sunday school class, or some other issue, have also caused problems.

Of course, sensitive leaders will try to defuse such powder kegs, but isn't it the responsibility of every member to refuse to engage in such arguments? Every member can speak more about worshiping the Lord than about labels, more about winning the lost than about style of worship, more about reading the Word than about furnishings.

9. What "trivial matters" have caused strife in churches? Who is responsible for keeping the church focused on eternal matters when these trivial issues pop up? What can you do to help people keep the right perspective (v. 14)?

The worker will be ashamed if the master finds him or her loafing or wasting time in fruitless efforts (see Matthew 25:14-30). The worker will be ashamed if the employer finds out that that employee has been working for someone else while being "on the clock."

When the King James Bible was printed in 1611, the word study meant to be diligent, not merely to pursue an academic

interest. It is our daily diligence in faith, active service of the Lord, and immersion in the Word of God that will safeguard our fruitfulness. This fruitfulness will be a witness to others in keeping them fruitful in the Lord as well.

Just as a worker would be embarrassed before his employer if it was discovered he had been sidetracked from his assignment, so it would be a disgrace if Timothy let his attention be diverted from presenting the sound doctrines of the faith.

This verse (2 Tim. 2:15) is justly famous as a call for the proper handling, or "dividing," of God's Word. To be approved before God, the only approval that ultimately matters, we must present His truth correctly!

10. What would cause a Christian "workman" to be "ashamed"? What specific safeguards can we put in place to be sure we are not unworthy workers (v. 15)?

CONCLUSION

God Deserves Your Best

When we witness to people about Jesus, we often stress the benefits. We often talk of the happiness and joy that comes to those who give their lives to Christ. In so doing, we sometimes make the mistake of making Christianity sound easy.

But Jesus never said it would be easy. Paul never said it would be easy. It is fulfilling, but not easy. Jesus warned people that they must take up a cross if they want to be Christians (Luke 9:23). Paul says in today's text that Timothy must sacrifice and work hard for the cause. There are some things worth sacrificing for. The Christian life is one of them.

In particular, our lesson today suggests that our great striving should be directed toward the ministry of the Word. This can mean preaching, but there are other ways to fulfill this admonition. For Timothy, who labored in the ministry of the Word as a vocation, no doubt it had special meaning. But there are many ways people can share God's Word, even if they are volunteer ministers.

Christians need the kind of all-consuming dedication that Paul speaks of in this lesson. His words to Timothy are his words to us!

PRAYER

Dear Father, help me to appreciate the privilege of having access to Your Word and Your gospel. Remind me, too, of my obligation to study and share that Word. May I show my devotion to Jesus by laboring faithfully on His behalf. In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Be an approved worker.