

Women's Bible Study Spring 2011
A Spiritual Legacy: Passing On What You Know
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Be Strong and Dedicated- 2 Timothy 2:1-7
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I remember the time over 25 years ago, when my husband, Jonathan, and I went diamond shopping for my engagement ring. I remember one of the things the jewelers did was to hold the diamond under a bright light, and then turn it this way and that. As they did so, sparkles of light were thrown out, dazzling our eyes. The clearer the stone and the finer the cut, the more dazzling it was. As I've been studying this relatively short passage of Scripture, I've been amazed – again – at what a rich, multi-faceted jewel the Word of God is. Even this relatively short passage holds so much, revealing even more truth as you turn it this way and that.

Now ladies, I'd like you to have a good look at this beautiful, feminine image of a diamond, because we're about to dive into a passage that is full of masculine images which are far from the delicate beauty of diamonds. In this passage, Paul is addressing his younger co-worker, Timothy, whom he calls his "son." In an effort to communicate with him effectively, Paul uses analogies that specifically appeal to the psyche of young men – images having to do with the military, athletics, and work. God has blessed me with two sons, and I also teach young men at the Secondary level at Schaeffer Academy. I know that when I'm trying to drive home a point, I almost invariably turn to analogies from the world of sports or the military, in order to connect with them. For example, a couple of years ago, Schaeffer choir was learning Handel's, "For Unto Us a Child is Born." It's a choral number that contains very long and complicated 16th-note runs. The guys were moaning and complaining about learning them, and in order to inspire them to hang in there, I said, "Think about Olympic diving, guys. These runs are the equivalent of a triple back flip, with a twist, and a tuck. They're difficult to master, but amazing when you're able to execute them flawlessly."

Well, in the same way, Paul is trying to connect with Timothy in a way that he will understand and appreciate. So he calls on Timothy to think about 3 full-time professions of his day – that of a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer, and he points out specific qualities in these professions that he wants Timothy to reflect upon and apply to his own ministry. Each of these three professions are very challenging in their own right, and so before giving his admonitions to Timothy, Paul begins in verses one and two, by laying down three foundational principles of the Christian life. It is these principles which will undergird Timothy in his ministry.

Verses 1-2 read, "*You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.*"

The first foundational principle laid down in these verses is that God uses weak vessels. With the words, "but you," Paul addresses Timothy, whom he had left to run the church at Ephesus. Timothy had been thrust into a position of responsible leadership far beyond his natural capacity. His responsibilities in Ephesus were many. They included combating heretics who were troubling the church there, ordering the church's worship, selecting and ordaining elders, organizing the ministry of its widows, commanding and teaching the apostolic faith, together with the moral duties that go with it!

Humanly speaking, Timothy was hopelessly unfit to assume these heavy responsibilities. First, we understand from other scriptures that Timothy was comparatively young. For example, Paul tells Timothy, “Let no one despise your youth,” (1 Tim. 2:22), and to “shun youthful passions.” (2 Tim. 2:22) Scholars estimate that Timothy may have been around 35 years old at the time these letters were written, while Paul was probably in his 60’s. Also, Timothy was rather frail physically and prone to illnesses. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul referred to Timothy’s “frequent illnesses” and recommended that, for his stomach’s sake, he give up drinking only water and try a little wine as well. Not only was Timothy physically frail, but he also seems to have been naturally shy and quite sensitive. Today, we would probably have described him as an introvert. Timothy had a tender emotional make-up, such that Paul could not forget the tears shed by Timothy when they parted. (2 Tim. 1:4) Several times in this second letter to Timothy, Paul exhorts him to take his share of suffering and not to be afraid or ashamed, since God has not given us a spirit of cowardice. (2 Tim. 1:7-8; 2:1,3; 3:12, 4:5) These admonitions were evidently necessary. Paul knew that Timothy was probably more inclined to LEAN than to LEAD, but in spite of all these natural weaknesses, Timothy had been given heavy leadership responsibilities, and been placed in a difficult environment where there was widespread defection among Christians. (1 Tim. 1:15) With the words, “but you, my son” Paul calls on Timothy to resist the prevailing mood and be strong.

Now, as John Stott puts it, “asking a man as timid as Timothy to be strong, was as good as telling a snail to be quick or a horse to fly!” Therefore, Paul quickly goes on to say, “But you, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” He lays down the second foundational principle, which is that God’s work is accomplished only by God’s filling. Paul was not calling Timothy to a form of stoicism. This was not a call to grit his teeth and get through it. Rather, it was a call for Timothy to draw his strength from the grace of Christ. It was a reminder that just as he was saved by grace, so now he is to live by grace. It was a reminder that his ability to serve God comes from God. Paul knew this to be true about his own ministry. He says in 2 Cor. 3: 5-6, “*Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant.*” In this same letter, Paul goes on to describe the dichotomy of the weak Christian, filled with the strength of God. “*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body...Therefore, we do not lose heart.*” (2 Cor. 4: 7 – 16)

These passages show us that God calls us to be His people, to be used in His service even though our bodies, our minds, and our hearts may be fraught with weakness. They also teach us that although we may feel weak and inadequate, this is not an acceptable excuse for not doing the work God calls us to. For, these passages also point to the fact that the Lord manifests Himself, both to us and to the watching world, through our weakness.

I will never forget the profound influence a woman – in a position of *great weakness* – had upon my life. I was 19 years old, and was spending my summer in a little village just outside of Paris, called Vaux-sur-Seine. I was working as a fille-au-pair at the Seminary there, and studying French at an international school nearby. I was struggling with a number of spiritual questions, and still recovering from some painful issues from my childhood. I met and befriended a woman named Madame

Case-Major, who had come to the seminary just for the summer as well. I used to visit her frequently in her room and spent many hours discussing spiritual matters with her. She patiently and gently listened to me and instructed me. I have never felt the presence of the Holy Spirit more strongly in anyone in my life. She was radiant with the love of Christ, and that presence of the Lord in her ministered to me more than anything. She helped not only me, but also other young women at the seminary, many of whom were also struggling with difficult issues. It was only after some time that she told me that her husband of over 30 years had just recently left her for another woman. Although she was the mother of 5 children, they were now all adults and living away from home. So she had suddenly found herself quite alone in the world, in a position of profound grief and weakness, and yet, how the Lord ministered through her to me and to others!

The circumstances that God allows into our lives frequently point out how weak we are. Sometimes it's like we hit a brick wall, and we feel *unable* to progress, or to do what we know God wants us to. Watchman Nee gives this helpful analogy of how God works in such circumstances. He says to imagine yourself as a little boat floating down the river of life. All is going well until you run into rocks mid-stream which block your progress. You're unable to get past these rocks and you keep banging into them. You beg God to "Please remove!" those rocks from your course. But God's way is different. Instead of removing the rocks, He swells the river beneath your boat, and you're able to pass over the rocks without a problem. In the same way, the Spirit of the Lord within us fills and enables us to accomplish the full requirements of God, no matter how impossible they are to us. His help is ours for the asking. Most of the time, the only way this truth is brought home to us is when God places us in circumstances which take us beyond our abilities. The Apostle Paul experienced this. In 2 Cor. 1, Paul says, "*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.*" (2 Cor. 1: 8-9)

Our weakness is designed to bring us to our knees in prayer, in the same way that Paul was forced to depend on God in his dire circumstances. In such circumstances, our merely *intellectual* acknowledgment of God's sufficiency has the opportunity of turning into a practical, living faith which allows the Lord to be revealed in our lives.

Paul lays down a third foundational principle in this first verse: our purpose. Having been called by the Lord, and equipped with His grace, what is this for? Our purpose as a church and as individual Christians is to hand on God's truth. So far, Timothy has been exhorted to hold the faith and guard the deposit (1:13-14). He is to do more than preserve the truth, however; he is also to pass it on. The disloyalty of the Asian church made it imperative that Timothy should guard the truth with loyalty; and the approaching death of the apostle made it equally imperative that Timothy should make arrangements for handing down the truth intact to the next generation. Paul envisions this APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION in the form of a relay race, where the baton of truth is transmitted from hand to hand in 4 stages:

The first stage was from CHRIST TO PAUL. Paul received his faith as a "deposit" from Christ, not by his own invention. Paul insists that his gospel is "not man's gospel" – He says, "I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ." (Gal. 1: 11, 12)

The second stage was then from PAUL TO TIMOTHY - As Christ entrusted the gospel to Paul, so now Paul entrusts it to Timothy. Notice that what Paul tells Timothy to pass on is truths that he's heard Paul share "in the presence of many witnesses." This shows that the apostolic faith was not a secret tradition handed on privately to Timothy (such as the Gnostics were claiming), but was rather a public instruction whose truth was guaranteed by the many witnesses who had heard it. This was a command not to admit any teaching but that which he heard from Paul himself. It's a warning to us also that in Christianity, there is no hidden doctrine or private revelations that can be called the Word of God.

The third stage was then from TIMOTHY TO "FAITHFUL MEN" - Now what Timothy has heard from Paul he is to "entrust to faithful – or reliable – men." The men Paul has in mind must be primarily ministers of the Word, whose chief function is to teach – Christian elders whose responsibility it would be – like Jewish elders of the synagogue – to preserve the tradition.

The fourth stage was from FAITHFUL MEN TO "OTHERS ALSO" - Such men should "be able to teach others also" – they must be capable teachers. (see I Tim. 3:2, II Tim. 2:24)

The Christian church is dependent on an unbroken chain of teachers: the handing on of the apostolic tradition, from the apostles themselves, to all subsequent generations. This apostolic tradition – "the good deposit" – is now to be found in the New Testament.

Notice that the idea of discipleship is embedded in this verse – the idea of multiplying our lives into the lives of other people – the idea of going deeply with just 1 or 2 people, rather than sewing broadly. The relationship between Paul and Timothy was really one of discipleship, or mentorship, where Paul, the older generation, disciples Timothy in the deep truths of the faith. In the same way, we can sometimes be more effective long-term if we sew deeply into the lives of a few individuals, who will then go on themselves to touch and teach others. It's worth asking ourselves how God has uniquely positioned us to minister to maybe just one or two people. Certainly as mothers and grandmothers, we can begin with our own children and grandchildren.

So, Paul has laid down these three foundational principles to Timothy: First, God has called you to a challenging task in spite of your weakness; you are to accomplish His work through the strengthening of His grace; and you are to faithfully preserve and pass on the "good deposit". Paul now goes on to enlarge on the teaching ministry to which Timothy has been called by comparing it to 3 other full-time professions of his day: that of a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer. Although Paul is addressing someone in full-time ministry, there is much that is applicable to us, who are all called to be full-time Christians in whatever our profession may be.

First, Paul calls Timothy to the dedication of a soldier. Verses 3-4 read: "*Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer.*" The picture of man as a soldier and life as a campaign is one which Romans & Greeks knew well. "To live," said Seneca, "is to be a soldier." (Seneca, Epistles 96:5) This was also a favorite metaphor of Paul's which he applied to all Christians, but here, he applies specifically to leaders in the Church. [See other reference to soldiers: Eph. 6:10ff; I Tim. 1:18, 6:12; 2 Cor. 6:7, 10:3-5; Rom 6: 13.14] Paul highlights particular aspects of a soldier's life which he wants Timothy to incorporate into his own ministry.

The first is the soldier's willingness, indeed, his *expectation*, to suffer. My son, Philip, loves to watch reality shows about training young men for Green Beret

service in the military. This is the toughest branch of the military, and the training period is designed to weed out everyone except the strongest candidates. It's absolutely excruciating, with little sleep, long days hauling heavy loads, and performing physically difficult tasks. One day when Philip was complaining about school and how hard it was, I desperately tried to think of a way to inspire and encourage him. I said, "You know, Philip, you're in a period of training right now – God has placed you in school to train you and toughen you up. It's like those guys in Green beret training. They don't expect it to be easy. In fact, they know it's going to be incredibly difficult and that only the toughest survive!" Soldiers on active duty do not expect a safe or easy time – they take hardship as a matter of course – it's all part of a soldier's calling.

Peter also instructs Christians in this military language when he says, "*Therefore, since Christ suffered in His body, arm yourselves also with the same mind...*" (1 Peter 4:1) Being armed in our mind to suffer is an attitude which says, "I am prepared to suffer for the Lord should He bring it my way." So when hardship does fall on us, we are not surprised, but fully prepared. An unprepared mind can lead to brokenness when suffering comes. If we can only accept God's favorable arrangements in our lives, then as soon as circumstances shift towards hardship, we can be broken and our work for the Lord ceases.

How much of a mind to suffer must we possess? The demand of the Scriptures is: "*faithful unto death*" (Rev. 2:10c) A soldier's supreme virtue is his willingness to be faithful, even unto death. Watchman Nee was a Chinese pastor who worked in the first half of the 20th century in China. His writings have been very influential both in China and around the world. He writes these words: "Having the mind to suffer is never moderately defined in God's word. We must give our ALL. A person who looks upon his own life as precious and guards his life carefully, is very limited in the work of God. Every one of us who would be in God's service must be prepared to be faithful unto death." Watchman Nee had to live out these words when he was taken prisoner by the Communist regime that took over China in the 1950s. He spent the last 20 years of his life in prison and Chinese labor camps because he refused to renounce his faith. He was stripped of his Bible and all access to any Christian material. Over the years, he was subjected to long hours of mental battering as they sought to re-educate him away from his Christianity. He died, sick and alone, in a labor camp. When his family came to collect his body, they found this slip of paper stuffed under his mattress. It read, "Christ is the Son of God who died to atone for men's sins, and who rose on the third day. This is the greatest fact in the universe. I believe in Christ and die." Watchman Nee was faithful, even unto death.

The preservation of our lives is up to the Lord. It is comforting to remember this saying by Henry Martin, which is also a favorite of Pastor Steer's – "I am immortal until God's work for me to do is done." (Henry Martin)

Timothy is also called to the single-minded focus of a soldier. When on active duty, a soldier does not "get himself entangled in business", but rather frees himself from civilian affairs in order to be wholly at the disposal of his commanding officer. The Roman code of Theodosius said: "We forbid men engaged in military service to engage in civilian occupations." During Paul's time, a soldier was a soldier and nothing else.

Now, this does not mean Christians must not engage in any secular tasks or business. As Christians, we live in the world and cannot avoid our duties at home, at work, and in the community. Paul had also just written to in his first letter to Timothy, that God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." (1 Tim.

6:17) This counsel applies specially to the Christian minister or pastor. He is called to devote himself to teaching and tending Christ's flock. He should not have the additional burden of having to earn his living in some "secular" employment. Although Paul himself was a tent-maker, he asserts the principle for himself and for every minister, by command of the Lord, that "those who proclaim the gospel should receive their living by the gospel." (1 Cor. 9:14)

Next, Paul points Timothy to the law-abiding athlete. Verse 5 reads, "*Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules.*" Again, this verse points to the fact that Timothy's ministry is to be a full-time endeavor. The phrase, "competes as an athlete," comes from a Greek phrase, "athlein nomimos" which translates, "striving lawfully". It is a Greek phrase used by later writers to describe the *professional* rather than the amateur athlete. The man who strove "nomimos" was the man who concentrated everything on his effort. In the same way, Paul is saying that Timothy's work in the church is to be the full-time dedication of his life, not just a spare-time occupation as with amateurs.

Secondly, Paul points out that every athlete must play according to the rules. A competitor in the Greek games knew that every sport had its rules – rules for the contest itself, and sometimes rules for the training period as well. Every event also had its prize. Prizes awarded at the Greek games were evergreen wreaths, rather than gold medals or silver trophies. However, there was the possibility of being disqualified if you didn't compete "according to the rules" – "No rules, no wreath" was the order of the day. The same is true in today's athletic arenas. With the illegal use of steroids, some athletes have made themselves stronger and faster than their competitors, winning by leaps and bounds, only to be disqualified in the end, and denied the prize when their drug use was discovered. Christians are called to play according to the rules: our moral conduct must remain true to the Word of God. I'm sure we are all aware of Christians, and Christian ministries in our country, that have been derailed due to financial scandals or adultery.

Within the context of this verse, however, the phrase "competing according to the rules" has a wider application than to our moral conduct. Paul is describing Christian *service*, not just Christian life. Paul seems to be saying that rewards for his *service* depend on faithfulness to the truth of God's Word. The Christian teacher must teach the truth, building with solid material on the foundation of Christ, if his work is to endure and not be burned up. (1 Cor. 3:10-15) Timothy must also persevere to the end, faithfully passing on the deposit of faith to reliable men. Only if, like Paul, he perseveres to the end – so that he, too, fights the good fight, finishes the race, and keeps the faith, can he expect on the last day to receive the most coveted of all wreaths, "the crown of righteousness." (2 Tim. 4: 7-8)

The third and final metaphor that Paul uses to describe the ministry to which Timothy has been called, is that of a farmer. He calls attention to the characteristic most needed for success in farming – that of hard work. Verse 6 reads, "*It is the hardworking farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.*" Hard work is indispensable to good farming. The Greek word indicates that the farmer "toils" at his job. This is particularly true in developing countries before mechanization arrives – success depends as much on sweat as on skill. No matter how hot it is, how poor the soil, or how disinclined the farmer, he must keep at his work. Growing up in West Africa, this is the type of farming I witnessed – it was grueling, backbreaking work.

The apostle Paul left us a stellar example. He labored and toiled on many different levels. He was involved in manual labor as a tentmaker. He could write, “We labor, working with our own hands.” (1 Cor. 4:12; cf. Eph. 4:28; 1 Thess. 4:11), and also, “These hands have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak.” (Acts 20:34-35) His exertions for the gospel were phenomenal. He could write of “labors, watching, hunger” because, like his Master before him, he was often too busy to sleep or to eat. Paul could claim the respect of the other apostles. He says, “I worked harder than any of them.” (2 Cor. 6:5; 1 Cor. 15:10) The nature of his toil was in “prayer and...the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). In Col. 1: 28-29, Paul reveals the source of his power: “*We proclaim Him, administering and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me.*”

We will not be much use in God’s service if we dislike work. Not only can a lazy person not be God’s servant, they cannot even be man’s! No earthly manager will allow laziness and carelessness indefinitely in any employee. The Lord wants us to delight in serving – to joyfully spend and be spent for the children of God – to love being engaged in working. A diligent person is on the lookout for ways to serve – studying, praying, waiting, and considering what service she can render. God is moving in many ways and in many directions, and if we lift up our eyes we will discover them. Before God, we ought to be those who continually offer ourselves up for His service, always fervent in spirit. This verse can be very encouraging for us in this respect: “*Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord for you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*” 1 Cor. 15:58

A farmer must not only be hardworking, but also must be content to work, and then to wait. The farmer knows that there are no quick results. The harvest does not come for many months. The ground must first be tilled, then the seed planted, and only after many months of sunshine and rain does the earth yield its crop. In the same way, the Christian worker sews the good seed of the Word into the hearts and minds of hearers. He may see no immediate results. Years may go before results are seen. Paul knew the reality of this waiting, for he says in Galatians 6:9, “*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*”

Paul ends his farmer analogy with reference to the harvest that comes. “The harvest is plentiful,” said Jesus, referring to the many who are waiting to hear and receive the gospel (Mt. 9:37; cf. Jn. 4:35; Rom. 1:13) Of course, it is “God who gives the growth.” (1 Cor. 3:6-7), but God works through us to accomplish His purposes, so we do not have the liberty to be idle. Both the sewing of the good seed of God’s word and the reaping of the harvest are hard work, especially when the laborers are few. Christian service is hard work – it is “toil”. It includes striving and struggling, becoming weary and tired. Souls are won to Christ by tears and sweat and pain, especially in prayer and in sacrificial personal friendship. But it is the *hardworking* farmer who can expect good results.

So by using these three images of the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer, Paul conveys the aspects of wholeheartedness which he wants to see in Timothy, and in all those who like Timothy seek to pass on to others ‘the good deposit’ they have themselves received. We need the dedication of a good soldier, the law-abiding obedience of a good athlete, and the painstaking labor of a good farmer. Without these qualities, we cannot expect results. There will be no victory for the soldier

unless he gives himself to his soldiering, no wreath for the athlete unless he keeps the rules, and no harvest for the farmer unless he toils at his farming. One thing remains constant in all 3 pictures – the soldier is upheld by the thought of final victory; the athlete is upheld by the vision of the crown; the farmer is upheld by the hope of the harvest. Each is willing to submit to the discipline and toil required for the sake of the reward to come.

Paul leaves Timothy with this final admonition: “*Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.*” (vs. 7) Notice that there are two halves to understanding the truth of God’s Word. First, there is our human part. Timothy is told he must “think over” or “reflect on” the apostle’s teaching – he must apply his mind to what’s being taught. For us, to reflect on the Word of God may mean getting down to some serious Bible study – not just skimming through Bible passages in a cursory manner. We are to “think over” what the Bible says. Then Paul talks about God’s part. Paul *promises* that if Timothy reflects on what’s being said, then the Lord will give him insight into all of it. It’s not enough to just use your mind and grapple with the text with various versions, concordances, and commentaries. It is the Lord who imparts understanding, and He imparts it as a gift. John Stott puts it very nicely when he says, “We must not divorce what God has joined together – for the understanding of Scripture a balanced combination of thought and prayer is essential.” We must do the considering, and the Lord give the understanding. Even though Paul gives Timothy 3 clear pictures of what wholehearted ministry means, he still concludes with leaving the opening of Timothy’s eyes, his spiritual understanding, in the Lord’s hands.

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