

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (16-2-1997 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

2 Timothy 2:1-7

Additional Bible reading: Romans 6:1-16

Introduction

Paul uses three allusions, or pictures, of the Christian worker, to explain his work and the qualities required of him. Each picture is from daily life and is used in the other epistles. They are the soldier, from whom we learn dedication, the athlete, from whom we learn discipline, and the farmer, from whom we learn hard work.

Then Paul speaks about his teaching, and the part played by the Lord in giving understanding. These words encouraged the timid, retiring, physically weak man, Timothy, to whom Paul was handing the torch. His faithfulness would need to be expressed in the ways detailed here. They are particularly applicable to men in the ministry or mission field, but applicable also to all believers.

The Christian worker as a soldier

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 (2 Timothy 2:3,4). Paul's travels in the Roman Empire and present experiences in prison gave him many opportunities to observe the Roman soldiers and see the parallels between the military life and Christian service. He had made similar comparisons in earlier epistles – the armour of God (Ephesians 6:10ff), fighting the good fight of faith (1 Timothy 6:12), and the weapons of our warfare not being carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:4).

In this letter, Paul emphasises the Christian as a soldier, dedicated and fully focused on the work in hand, whatever the cost and suffering. A good soldier endures hardship, he does not expect an easy time or guaranteed safety. Hardships, wounds, fighting, pain, suffering and discomfort were all part and parcel of the calling. If he was not prepared for all that, he should not have enlisted in the first place. The supreme sacrifice needed to be prepared for. A French general in the First World War told his troops, "You must not retire. You must hold on at all costs." An officer replied, "That means we must all die." "Precisely", he was told.

Be faithful unto death (Revelation 2:10). The Lord Jesus Christ never sheltered from would-be disciples the costliness of being a Christian. If people realized this at the beginning, they would not fall away later. **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"** (Mark 8:34). **"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple"** (Luke 14:26).

In a God-rejecting world, no Christian will get away with an easy time. Opposition and ridicule cannot be avoided – no matter how tactful and gracious we are. "God has called you to Christ's side and the wind is now in Christ's face in this land....

Therefore if you are with Him, you cannot expect to be on the lee-side or the sunny-side of the brae.” (Rutherford).

Timothy was also to learn to be like the soldier in the way he focused and concentrated on the task in hand, not getting distracted or entangled with civilian affairs. His aim was to be to please the commanding officer who had enlisted him – God. Often during World War II, austerity and self-denial was justified on the grounds “There’s a war on”. Of course the Christian must fulfil his duties in the family, workplace and community – he should be the most conscientious father, worker and citizen. And he should also enjoy the good things in life God has given for his enjoyment. **For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving** (1 Timothy 4:4). **God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment** (1 Timothy 6:17). But entanglement is forbidden. He must not be caught up with things so that he can no longer be his best for the Lord and obey his commissioning officer’s orders. “Your will be done”, “One thing I do” ought to be his motto.

We make it our goal to please Him (2 Corinthians 5:9). Be careful lest things which are innocent and even helpful to an extent can in the end be a hindrance and a stumbling block. Christ’s Cross “demands my soul, my life, my all” (Isaac Watts). We are called to devote ourselves to Christ. This will involve hardship, self-denial, suffering and total consecration to the Master’s will.

It all sounds very strange in a self-indulgent and materialistic age, especially in Western Europe. The first people who need to learn this lesson are in Christian ministry. 20 years ago many missionaries went out to countries like Africa and India, even though Africa had earned itself the title “White man’s grave”. Climate and disease often brought death – but still men and women went out to evangelise. But nowadays it is difficult to get people (not least evangelicals) to settle in difficult parishes, or areas that are too tough. There is a softness nowadays, and lack of commitment to the will of God.

And in ministry men can so often get caught up with many distractions. The main work – preaching, prayer and pastoral work – gets pushed aside by committees, social service, marriage guidance, amateur psychology, scholarship as an end in itself. If not committed and if not concentrating on the job to which they are called, how can they with conviction preach this to their congregations?

All Christians are called to endure hardship and give self to God’s purpose for their life. Get your priorities right, keep the edge to your testimony, keep Christ central and keep your spiritual appetite alive. We are called to be soldiers, and good soldiers at that, accepting all that it involves. Do God’s will – whenever and whatever - and do not rule out anything.

The Christian worker as an athlete

Now Paul turns from soldier in the Roman army to a competitor in the Greek games. An athlete was not crowned unless he competed according to the rules. In no athletic contest in Paul’s day did the competitor give a random display of strength or skill.

Strict rules existed, even regarding preparation, e.g. they had to state an oath that there had been 10 months prior training – else the standard of the games was lowered.

Every sport has its rules and its prize. In the first century it was not gold, silver or bronze medals, but evergreen wreaths. But the rules had to be obeyed first.

In the New Testament, the Christian life is often described as a race. Not in the sense of competing against one another, but in the sense of self-discipline, especially the body, which has to be brought into subjection. **I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize** (1 Corinthians 9:27). **Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus** (Hebrews 12:1,2).

Christians are required to run the race lawfully. There are clear rules about the Christian life that are absolute and unchanging, whatever century we live in. We live in the days of “New morality” and “situation ethics” – i.e. no rules and no laws. We are told to be guided by love – but that means different things to different people. It means that nothing is right or wrong, for it depends on the situation – and so it is possible to excuse away adultery, cheating, lying etc.

But according to the New Testament we are to abide by laws and rules. Not in order to be saved, but because we are now saved, they are to be a guide to our conduct. The Ten Commandments are not out of date. They are for this generation. **God did by sending his own Son.... in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us** (Romans 8:3,4). **"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant"** (Jeremiah 31:31), and it is written on our hearts.

But the context has wider application than to moral conduct. Paul is talking about Christian service as well as Christian life. Rewards for service depend on faithfulness. The Christian teacher must build with solid materials on the foundation of Christ if the work is to endure. So Timothy was to pass the message on to faithful men. And only if he persevered to the end, finishing the race, keeping the faith, could he expect to receive at the last day that most coveted of all wreaths – the crown of righteousness. **I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing** (2 Timothy 4:7,8).

Has not the modern athlete a lesson to teach us on self-discipline? Consider the hours he spends each day and week in training, with all the self-denial. Yet some Christians cannot even discipline themselves to set aside half an hour each day to have a quiet time, or cannot make the time for the prayer meeting at the church. There should be no relaxation in trying to be the best we can be for the Lord. It all depends on whether we have a passion for Him and whether He means all to us.

The Christian worker as a farmer

If the soldier must endure hardship, and the athlete must be self-disciplined and abide by the rules, the farmer must work hard. He deserves to have the first share of the crops. Hard work is vital to good farming. Especially in Paul's day, before mechanization, sweat was as important as skill for success. It is no nine to five job, with no statutory holidays, and must be done in all weathers. So the farmer deserves a share of his crops.

Toil for the Christian is seen in two areas. Firstly, in holy living. It is true that the Holy Spirit causes fruit to grow, but we have to walk in the Spirit, and abide in Him. **Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature** (Galatians 5:16), **Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up** (Galatians 6:9). **I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing** (John 15:5).

The second area in which the Christian must toil is in reaching others for Christ. The harvest is plentiful. The fields are white and ready for harvest. It is God who gives the increase, but still it is up to us to sow and pray and reap. **I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow** (1 Corinthians 3:6). It is very hard work for the labourers are few, and therefore there are not many to share the burden.

Of all jobs, farming has little glamour. No excitement or applause is received – unlike the soldier or the athlete. The farmer has to be content to work and then wait. He knows there is no such thing as a quick result. Hard work in Christian service requires working, and waiting. Patience is essential. We may sweat and toil for many years without seeing any fruit. Instant results are very rare. And yet Paul uses a word here that suggests working hard to the point of exhaustion. He uses the same word to describe the work of many Christians: **Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you** (Romans 16:6); **Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord** (Romans 16:12); **The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching** (1 Timothy 5:17). Paul did not ask from others what he was not prepared to do himself: **No, I worked harder than all of them** (1 Corinthians 15:10). **To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me** (Colossians 1:29).

A word to all parents, Sunday School teachers, preachers, witnesses – be prepared for hard work, sweat, tears, disappointments and discouragements. Be content to toil for years without seeing any result. In some cases you will not see the result in this life. Be patient and persevere. Cling onto this: **Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up** (Galatians 6:9).

So the soldier looks to victory, the athlete looks to a crown, and the farmer looks to the harvest – but he may have to keep looking for a very long time.

Conclusion

These three pictures of the Christian worker show three aspects of commitment: dedication, discipline and hard work. Without these we cannot expect results. **Reflect**

on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this (2 Timothy 2:7). Timothy was to use his mind, and God would give the understanding – human and divine elements involved. This is an important Bible balance. Human study and divine illumination are both needed in order to arrive at the truth.

Some Christians never do any serious thinking or serious study of the Word. They are either too lazy, or pseudo spiritual – hoping the Holy Spirit will somehow give them everything in a flash of light. Others are good at Bible study, use their minds, consult different translations and commentaries – but forget that it is the Lord who gives spiritual understanding. We must not separate what God has joined together. For understanding the Scriptures, there must be a balanced combination of mind and prayer. **Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you** (Philippians 1:12,13). **I labour, struggling with all his energy** (Colossians 1:29). “I must labour as much as if I were to do all and pray as much as if I were nothing. 100% of me. 100% of God.” (Andrew Bonar).