

## The Disciplined Church

**2 Timothy 2:1** *You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. <sup>3</sup> You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. <sup>5</sup> And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. <sup>6</sup> The hard-working farmer must be first to partake of the crops. <sup>7</sup> Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things. (2 Tim. 2:1-7)*

I want us to look into 2 Timothy, to see Paul's instructions to Timothy about how he should approach ministry. Here was a young pastor, faced with several changes, including his mentor, Paul imprisoned, and about to pass off the scene. Paul wanted Timothy to disciple others, to teach faithful men who would teach others also. But Timothy needed to be told how to approach these changes, what attitude to adopt, what expectation to have.

What does it look like to be a hard-working, disciplined church? For that matter, since those churches are made up of many Christians, what does it look like to be a hard-working, disciplined Christian? Paul gives us the answer here in 2 Timothy 2. Here Paul gives Timothy three examples of disciplined people. These three pictures of diligence, hard-work, discipline overlap, but yet they each fill in part of the picture of what spiritual discipline looks like. In each case, there is a kind of discipline, and a kind of reward that comes from the discipline.

### I. The Durable Soldier

You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of *this* life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.

A Christian worker is like a soldier, a soldier of Jesus Christ. And writing in Roman times, Paul knew that Timothy would immediately get the picture of a Roman soldier. Of all the armies in the world, no armies trained their soldiers in sheer toughness and enduring harshness than the Romans. Roman soldiers were trained with marches of 29 kilometres, which had to be completed in 5 hours, carrying all their armour and backpacks. They were threatened with the death penalty for many offences in the army, and made special oaths of loyalty to the Empire because of the demands. Their ruthlessness in training, made them ruthless in battle.

Even today, when we think of a soldier, we think of someone who gives up ease. Someone who lives on army rations, who wears army uniforms, who sleeps in military barracks at home, or in great discomfort on the battlefield. Someone who submits to punishing training, getting up at odd hours, who is separated from loved ones for long periods, who faces danger and hostile conditions. When we hear that phrase “You're in the army now!”, we know it means, your life of ease and comfort is over.

Soldiers don't get to tell the sergeant major that their beds are too hard. They don't get little cards from the corporal saying, “Rate my service, today.” Soldiers accept certain losses, pains, difficulties and drawbacks, because that's what enlisted life is like. That's why Paul says, the soldier does not get entangled with the affairs of this life. He is not a halfway soldier, always looking back, always trying to see how he can be both a civilian and a soldier. He accepts that in the army he must endure hardship.

Paul calls on this image to say part of discipline for the individual Christian, and for the local church is to embrace and endure hardship. The verb means to suffer misfortune. Accept difficulty as part of the package.

Serving God by serving others includes difficulty. What God called you to in salvation was not an easier life than the one you left, not more comfort for less work. God called you to battle. And Paul wants us to adjust our expectation and realise ministry involves hardship.

You don't have to explain this to Christians in North Korea or Iran, where some are in labour camps, where converts from Islam can be killed in honour killings by relatives. But you do have to remind Christians in South Africa, where we feel hardship might be getting up earlier on Sunday to make the Sunday School, or having a fussy child in church, or our meeting place being rather cold. These are hardships, but if we are to be soldiers, we need to embrace them as normal, without murmuring, but embrace others. Embrace the hardship of discipling someone weekly in the evening, when you'd rather just relax at home. Embrace the hardship of giving up some things so as to give what you've pledged to the Lord. Embrace the hardship of travelling to visit, to encourage, to attend. Embrace the hardship of criticism, of spiritual attack, of slander, of a physical disability that makes it harder. We are not looking for hardship for its own sake, but whatever hardship comes to get the job done is what we embrace.

I don't know what some hardness looks like for you, but ask yourself, "Is there anything in my service for Christ which is difficult, and uncomfortable. Have you accepted some inconvenience, some loss, some sacrifice to fulfill your church covenant?" Or do you feel that the moment something is hard, that something is wrong, and it needs to be fixed?

Imagine an army where the soldiers had the option to not pitch up when they'd had a late night, or were feeling down. Imagine an army where the soldiers got to complain whenever they were inconvenienced. Imagine an army where the soldiers came to 3 out of every 5 training sessions, maybe 1 out of every 6 battles. Picture how successful an army would be if the soldier got to say, "No, that's not my area, I won't flourish if I do that"

What's the reward in verse 4? Pleasing Him who enlisted you. The delight of knowing that when you sacrifice for Christ, it pleases Him. It doesn't earn you merit with Him, but it does delight Him. And that's what love does – it seeks to please the one it loves.

Look at the second image of discipline.

## **II. The Dedicated Athlete**

*<sup>5</sup> And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.*

Here Paul brings to mind the picture of an athlete. Again, in Roman times, the athlete was well known. Where Timothy ministered, lay just 388 kilometres east of Corinth, where the famous Isthmian games were held. They would suspend all wars between Greek states for the time of the games. The month in which they were held was called the sacred month. Huge crowds came from all over to view them. Winners would be received home with a triumphal procession, with a new opening in the city wall broken open just for him, a chariot would carry him to the temple of that town's particular god. Welcoming songs were sung, poems were written about the athlete, and in some cases, the victor could be released from all further taxation. A statue of the athlete would often be raised in the city.

But what Paul wants us to notice about an athlete's discipline is that he cannot win, unless he competes according to the rules. A javelin thrower could not throw a rock instead. The sprinter was not allowed a false start. You can try to win by cheating, but there's a high chance you'll be disqualified, and there's no honour in winning by cheating. So if you want to win within the boundary of the rules of your sport, you have to train and practice until you master the skill.

You have to keep repeating the same motion, or the same approach, until you become highly efficient, and perhaps the best. You train, and train, and exercise, so as to keep improving.

So it is in spiritual discipline. There are no shortcuts to spiritual success. There is no way to cheat and make ministry happen easier or faster. Growth in Christ, and service to Christ is made up of repeating certain spiritual disciplines again and again. Meditating on Scripture, praying, worshipping with the church, giving, discipling another believer, evangelising. The more you do these things, the more regularly you do them, the more the skill grows, and the better you become.

No one could expect victory at the Olympic level if he practised his sport once or twice a week.

You cannot build ministry on people who come to church 2 Sundays out of 5. You cannot disciple others when your own life is as unstable as water, when you are tossed to and fro by your feelings, and your moods.

*Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth and a foot out of joint. (Prov. 25:19)*

It begins with simply being regular to corporate meetings. It continues into membership, counting yourself in among the church and ready to serve. And then it proceeds to regular, weekly service of God's people. It's a good thing to have a regular responsibility in the body of Christ.

What would happen if pastors said, "You know, I've had a tough week. I think this Sunday will just be a family day for us" and then we just didn't pitch up. Or what if pastors said, "You know, we've had some late nights and been pushing really hard. Let's give it a skip this week." Or if we said, "I just need a break from all those people. I think we'll just pray at home." Or perhaps, "I'm not really happy with my church. I think I'll visit some other one his Sunday." There'd be some consternation from people. "No, you can't do that! You're the pastor." Well, let's remind ourselves. Do we believe in the priesthood of the believer? Is every believer not a minister? Is every believer not charged to do the work of the ministry? Is the pastor not simply an equipper of the saints? Have we not all agreed to the same church covenant? Why then two standards?

A church would quickly sink if its leaders showed no faithfulness, and no dedication. But a church where the members do the same, won't go very far either. I sometimes wish that the Lord's Day were not on a weekend, because I wonder how it might change the attitude amongst Christians. If it were a workday like all others, perhaps Christians would not see church as part of their weekend recreational activities, one of several pleasant but optional things to do on the weekend.

The athlete is dedicated because he seeks the reward of victory. Dedication in spiritual things can also rightly seek to see victories: people being saved, more baptisms, spiritual growth in lives, marriages coming together.

The third image Paul gives is

### **III. The Diligent Farmer**

*The hard-working farmer must be first to partake of the crops.*

The soldier pictures durability, the athlete pictures dedication, and the farmer pictures diligence. Farmers are synonymous with hard work. They are up early to milk the cows. They're in the fields, planting, spraying, pruning, harvesting. Nature is unforgiving, and no farmer gets to tell planting season that he doesn't feel like planting. Planting season is coming, and he either works hard in it or he becomes a poor man. If parasites are threatening his crop, he cannot complain that he has not had any me-time this week, or just check-out. Reality has a nasty way of punishing the person who

shuts his eyes and ears to it.

A farmer works hard. He puts his back into it. There are early mornings and late hours. There are callouses on the hands and blisters on the feet. There is physical exhaustion.

Remember Tozer's words about diligence? "The amount of loafing practiced by the average Christian in spiritual things would ruin a concert pianist if he allowed himself to do the same thing in the field of music. The idle puttering around that we see in church circles would end the career of a big league pitcher in one week. No scientist could solve his exacting problem if he took as little interest in it as the rank and file of Christians take in the art of being holy. The nation whose soldiers were as soft and undisciplined as the soldiers of the churches would be conquered by the first enemy that attacked it. Triumphs are not won by men in easy chairs. Success is costly.""

See here is the Christian misconception. Some people have the idea that because we believe in grace that we are somehow undermining grace or turning the Christian life into works if we apply too much effort. We think that hard work is somehow antithetical to grace. But notice how Paul begins this chapter in verse 1: *You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.*

Paul tells Timothy to be strong in the grace of the Lord Jesus. This is interesting because in the original language it is an imperative passive. What that means is that it is a command -something Timothy must obey, but at the same time it is passive, something that must be done to him. Literally, it is, be strengthened in the grace of the Lord Jesus. Receive strength and use it. Be strong in another's strength.

This is at the heart of Christian discipline. Be strong through another. Give it your all, while leaning on someone else. Work as hard as possible, with energy that is given to you. This is not a work of the flesh. It is not trusting in ourselves. It is straining with God-given strength.

<sup>29</sup> To this *end* I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily. (Col. 1:29)

If we are willing to submit to this Scripture, there is a lot of work ahead of us.

The farmer is the first to eat of his own produce. And so the church that labours gets to enjoy the fruit of spiritually healthy people. When we work hard, our youth enjoy a vibrant youth discipleship, our children enjoy vibrant Sunday Schools. Mothers enjoy the support of young mother's groups. Loneliness becomes more scarce as spiritual friendships about. Seeing people saved thrills everyone's heart.

So what do you do practically? First, you examine your own walk with God to see if it displays durability, dedication, and diligence.

Second, look at your corporate walk with God, and see if it displays durability, dedication, and diligence. Start with the basics. Decide if this is the church for you. Being a permanent spectator is not good for you. If you are a member, either re-affirm that this is where you are covenanted, or make the necessary move to a church where you can,

Third, be regular. Regular to everything. If you skip the Sunday School you are skipping 50% of this church's public teaching ministry. If you come to church every second or third Sunday, you may as well be listening to a phone conversation where you hear every third word. It's not going to benefit you. And if the current Wednesday night venues are difficult to attend, speak to me or the deacons about starting one in your home.

Fourth, if you are not a member, become one. At least learn what it means and understand its purpose, and then decide if it is for you.

Fifth, find a regular place of service in a church. If you don't have one, and don't know what to do, speak to me.