

SOLDIERS, ATHLETES, AND FARMERS

by Ray C. Stedman

The business of Christians in any age is to guard the truth which has been entrusted to them. That was the Apostle Paul's charge to Timothy in Second Timothy 1:14: "Guard the truth which has been entrusted to you." In Chapter 2 of that letter we are exploring four ways by which this is accomplished. As Christians, it is necessary for us to understand that must be done in every age.

The 1st century world in which Timothy lived was one of distorted values, misleading commitments, confused thinking, and dangerous misconceptions. As a result, the whole Roman world was about to explode with violence. In the east, the Jewish revolt, which would culminate with the armies of Titus besieging Jerusalem for a couple of years, had begun. Finally, the Temple would be destroyed, the Jews slaughtered, and other carried away into captivity among the nations. All this was just around the corner.

Today, we live in a similar kind of age. The modern proverb, "What you see is not what you get," is sharp testimony to the fact that ours is a deceitful age. We live in a world of deep trouble. I saw some frightening statistics the other day on the mounting rate of teenage suicide. As despair spreads like a blanket across our world, young people are losing hope for the future. They see no reason why they should struggle with life, so they are taking their own lives. There are many other manifestations of unrest and evil in our day too: child abuse, widespread public pornography, muggings and rapes, students who cannot seem to learn to even read or write in our school systems.

The great question of life in this day, as it was in Paul's day, is, "How can you guard the truth? How do you preserve sanity in an insane world?" Paul's answer to that question is fourfold:

His first word is, "You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (Chapter 2, Verse 1). That is, in order to keep the faith and guard the truth, you yourself must be strong; and that is achieved by learning to rely on the only reliable source in a day of declension -- "The grace that is in Christ Jesus."

I submit to you that those are much more than mere religious words; they are words of great, practical value. The only way you can keep your inner life strong is by a relationship to the Living God. That has been proven again and again in human history. If you think you can stand against the forces of today's world by leaning on your friends, your family, your guru, your psychiatrist, or your counselor, you will find they will crumble when you need them most. The only reliable source of strength in a day in which the world is falling apart is what Paul calls here, "The grace that is in Christ Jesus." We sing that in our hymns: "On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand." That expresses what the apostle is saying here.

The second thing Paul says is to pass that on to others who will be able to hand it on to still others. He says, "What you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (Chapter 2, Verse 2). There is a tremendous responsibility to communicate truth to your children, to your friends, and to your neighbors.

That word is not addressed to young pastors only; it is addressed to Christians everywhere. We all are expected to be communicators of the truth, to pass on what we ourselves are deeply convinced is true. That is the second step in "guarding the truth."

This morning we come to the third and fourth steps, which are presented in the verses immediately following, beginning with Verse 3 of Chapter 2, and continuing through Verse 13. The third step is given in these words:

Take your share of [or, Share in] suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier on service gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to satisfy the one who

enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. {2 Tim 2:3-6 RSV}

Those three very expressive metaphors which Paul uses add up to saying one thing: in a world that is falling apart, Christians must commit themselves without reserve to obey the Lord Jesus Christ. Basically, what the apostle is saying is, surrender your options; give up any other objective; burn your bridges. Resolutely follow your Lord. Admit no alternatives. Set yourselves to live a Christian lifestyle wherever you are, whatever you are doing, and refuse all others.

Paul says to do that requires the dedication of a soldier, the discipline of an athlete, and the diligence of a farmer. That is very necessary for our day, because in every generation there are Christian hangers-on who really are not Christians at all. What tells the story is how much they are willing to endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

That will take, as Paul suggests, the dedication of a soldier. There are two things he brings out in that:

First, it involves suffering: "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." In one sense, I am grateful for the realism of television and movies today with regard to war. It used to be that young men would go away to war with bands playing and banners flying. It looked like they were doing a glorious thing. But we know better now. Thanks to television and movies, we have seen the awful gore, the blood, and mud, sweat and tears of war paraded before us.

That is one reason why a great protest is rising from the younger generation of our day against what they rightly see as the madness of war. War is an evil thing; there is nothing glorious about it. War results in death, the maiming of bodies and the destruction of minds, oftentimes of innocent people. War is an ugly and a vicious thing. No one in his right mind defends it. What young people have to understand, however, is that war is part of the consequences of evil in human society, so it is unavoidable. War is a judgment from God on all the nations involved in it because of the toleration of injustice, oppression and corruption which has been winked at, and even approved of, for many years. War is the result. We cannot avoid it, nor can young people avoid it either. We have to see that war is part of the evil in society.

A soldier has to suffer. War is not a picnic. A soldier does not go out to enjoy life, to see the world, and have many wonderful experiences of adventure and travel, despite what the recruitment posters say. That does have some element of truth about it, but that is not what one does as a soldier. If warfare breaks out, it is going to mean he is faced with ugly, arduous, uncomfortable living.

Paul is saying that the Christian faces the same thing. We are not called to be Christians to merely enjoy life, to have everything around us pleasant and comfortable. That has been the deadly danger of evangelical Christianity for far too many decades. Because of that, today we are facing some of the evil aspects that have come from that kind of thinking. No, says the apostle, we are to endure hardness, we are to get involved with life at its most wretched, and sometimes most uncomfortable, expression.

These last few weeks, our Board of Elders has been in a process of evaluating pastors, staff members and other elders. In his report to us, one pastor included a vivid description of his ministry, which I would like to share with you. This is what he said:

Adding to the adventure [of his ministry] is the wide spectrum of problems that unfolds. There are all forms of anger, from long-standing resentment and unforgiveness, to rebellion, violence, child-beating, mutilating, wife-torture, threats against life, murder-for-hire, and Mafia-related revenge. There are the sexual offenses of rape, incest, sodomy, homosexuality, gang sex, swingers, bestiality, fornication, and the ever-present adultery. There are marital problems of every kind: attempted or contemplated suicide (and an occasional successful suicide), abortions and adoptions. I see many family problems between parents, or single parents and children. There are also the addicts of every sort: alcoholics, drugaholics, foodaholics, workaholics, sexaholics, spendaholics. There are the institutionalized, either coming from or going to, a prison, hospital, detox unit, mental facility; there are the psychotic to deal with. There are the quieter problems of legal, finances, and career; questions about a specific passage of Scripture, or those who simply want to know about PBC. The

problems I have just recalled from memory are representative of cases that have been in my office or home over the past twelve or eighteen months.

That is a slice of real life. And it is not only pastors who are called to that kind of ministry; we all are to some degree. Those things are happening all around us. We are to be involved in trying to work them out, to share in the pain, the hurt and the suffering that may be involved. That is what Paul is saying: "Endure suffering, take your share of it, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ."

The second thing about a soldier is that he requires a degree of single-mindedness; soldiers have only one objective: "A soldier does not get entangled with civilian pursuits, but his aim is to satisfy the one who enlisted him."

That was particularly true in the Roman army; a commander would gather around him men who knew him, loved him, trusted him and would follow him anywhere. Those were the ones who won the great battles for Rome.

The apostle picks that up and says that is the way Christians ought to be. Our one objective is not to get something for ourselves and something for the Lord, but to please him.

And it is not to be a twofold objective: we are not to be good Christians and try to get rich too; we are not to be good Christians and try to be famous or to have pleasurable experiences all our life long. That is not single-mindedness; that is the "double-minded man who is unstable in all his ways," (James 1:8 {RSV}). But being a Christian does not mean that we cannot use our gifts and our natural talents. We are to employ ourselves in various endeavors; there is nothing wrong with that. Paul was a tentmaker; some of the disciples were fishermen. Those pursuits are proper, but they are not to be the great objective in life, that is the point. Christianity is not a way of doing special things; it is a special way of doing everything. The objective is that, in the midst of whatever we do, whatever our line of business, we are manifesting the character of Jesus Christ. We are seeking to be pleasing to him.

There is a type of Christianity around today, which I have learned to call "Amway Christianity," which suggests that God's reason for coming into your life is to make you rich. It says that if you are faithful to him, if you are a good, hardworking salesman, you will end up wearing furs and driving Cadillacs, and that is the sign of God's blessing upon your ministry. Nothing could be further from the truth of the New Testament. There you find that Christians sometimes expected to have their property taken away, and they accepted that with good grace. The letter to the Hebrews commends the Christians for having accepted with rejoicing the spoil and the loss of their property because they knew they had a better home in heaven; they were looking for a city which has foundations which God alone would build. That is the Christian position.

The only objective of the Christian soldier should be to follow the Lord Jesus. The motive here is one of love. Not duty, but love. It is a conviction that the One you are following is Lord of heaven and earth, and that he has already done so much for you that your proper response is to be available to him to be used wherever he wants you to be used. "Unto him who loved us," says John in Revelation, "and washed us from our sins in his own blood," {Rev 1:5b KJV}. We sing that in our hymns too:

"Amazing love how can it be,
that thou my God wouldst die for me."

That is the motivation of a Christian soldier.

Then, says the apostle, the Christian lifestyle requires the discipline of an athlete: "An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules." There is a different motivation. It is really a form of ambition, but a very proper ambition. Every athlete learns that he has to deny himself certain things if he wants to win. He cannot eat just any kind of food; he has to give up chocolate sundaes, strawberry shortcake, and all the rich, luxurious indulgences that others can freely have. He may have to sit and eat cardboard while others enjoy something else, but he does it. The athlete does not indulge in certain pleasures. He does not go in for late nights, wild living, revelings, carousings and drunkenness that others may go in for. He resolutely

predetermines that he is not going to involve himself in those, so that when the occasion arises he says, No. He does not indulge in certain vices. He gives up smoking and drinking because it hurts and harms the body.

The athlete does so because he wants to win; that is the point. He wants to be "crowned." (That is what the apostle speaks of here.) These crowns are not something we earn by our faithfulness. Rather, they represent a test (we will see more of that in a moment) that reveals whether we really are athletes for Christ or not; they represent a proper goal in our life. We do not want to lose out on what God has for us; we want to achieve all that he has made available, so we are ready to say no to many things in order to gain that.

I hope many of you have seen the film, *Chariots of Fire*. That is probably one of the best films showing today. It is the story of an athlete who wants to win, but he wants to win with honor, and he is ready to deny himself the joy of winning if he has to win without honor. The film is a moving presentation, based on a true story, of a young man who, in the early part of this century, was an outstanding runner in England. It depicts for us so much of what Paul is saying here.

A Christian is called to say "No" to many things today. There are visual stimuli on every side that tempt us to give in, to indulge ourselves, to seize hold of life and enjoy it now. But a Christian soldier has to say, "No! I won't do it. Those things lead to distraction, to disruption and to a lessening of spiritual intensity in my life; I won't do them." That is the discipline of an athlete.

Then, says the apostle, the Christian also needs the diligence of a farmer: "It is the hardworking farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops."

The emphasis there is upon the word, *hard-working*. Being a Christian is not just floating through life with God working for you. Rather, it is you working for God, enjoying the privilege of being his faithful servant through whom he does his work today. There is no greater calling than that. Yet, the attitude of many Christians today is, "I've become a Christian in order to get God to bless me, and work for me. If he doesn't do it the way I want, I'm ready to quit. I don't want anything to do with Christianity when it gets difficult." That's the very thing the apostle is warning against in this passage.

Being a Christian takes long hours of labor. A Christian is called upon to reprogram the computer of his mind to think differently than other people think. That is not accomplished easily. It takes hours of reading the Bible and reading books about the Bible, until you see life the way the Bible sees it. It takes, perhaps, hours of listening to tapes, attending services, sharing and relating with other Christians how they are struggling and letting them see how you are. It takes diligent labor. It is not something that comes automatically because you happen to be a Christian.

Like a farmer, we might have to rise up early and work hard, we do so in expectation of a harvest. Paul always sets before us that life is not the end of the story, that what we may have to give up here is made up for abundantly when we step out of time into eternity. That is the day for which we labor.

Some of you may be saying, "If it is like that, count me out! Why should I give up many of life's pleasures for that kind of a grueling experience?"

Let me point out that the apostle goes on to give five marvelous encouragements that also accompany the Christian service. Yes, it will be hard. It will mean saying "No." It will mean working hard at times; but it has some tremendous, positive blessings that go along with it.

Here is the first one (Verse 7):

Think over what I say, for the Lord will grant you understanding in everything. {2 Tim 2:7 RSV}

That means, meditate on what Paul is talking about. Think about the Scriptures, not only as to what they mean -- as important as that is -- but how they fit. It is only as you start to think deeply about the Scriptures that you see that they are indeed the Book that goes with man.

The Scriptures have the explanation for the pressures you are going through. They are the analysis of the psychological difficulties that you yourself or others around you may be experiencing. They offer the only practical solution to the problems you yourself are facing. That is what you see as you think through the Scriptures. You see yourself differently. You learn to look at others differently. You see forces and powers at work that secular minds do not understand. You look at life differently, and the glorious thing is, you see how it fits: Here is the answer! For the first time, perhaps, you start to live realistically. That is the first encouragement. The puzzles and mysteries of life that baffle so many come to at least partial answers in the Christian's grasp of what God is doing today.

The second encouragement is the presence of a resurrected, and yet very human, Lord:

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David, as preached in my gospel, {2 Tim 2:8 RSV}

There is Paul's own personal word given to his beloved son in the faith of the secret of sustaining himself in the hour of pressure: "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead." Paul says that he who stood on the other side of the grave and said, "All power in heaven and on earth is given unto me" {cf, Matt 28:18 KJV}, is the One who is with you in the midst of your problem. When you remember that you will have a source of strength that nothing of the secular world can ever supply or rival. There is nothing like the realization that the Lord Jesus, the risen Lord, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, "He who opens and no man shuts, He who shuts and no man opens" {cf, Rev 3:7}, is working with you in your very situation. That is what gives a sense of hope when others see the situation as utterly hopeless. Christians hang on when everybody else quits, because they see that a resurrected Lord is at work; and resurrection power works best in a cemetery.

But Jesus is not only resurrected, he is human. He is descended from David; he is one of us; he has been where we are. He knows what we are going through. All of the frustration, the sense of despair and hopelessness flooded against him as it does against us, yet he stood, and now he helps us to stand. That is where strength comes from. As Christians understand this, they need less and less to turn to other human beings for help. Not that we ever wipe out the ministry of the rest of the body to ourselves, but we need it less and less in that desperate type of response that so many of us have manifested.

The third encouragement here is in Verse 9. Paul speaks of,

... the gospel for which I am suffering and wearing fetters like a criminal. But the word of God is not fettered. {2 Tim 2:9 RSV}

What difference does it make that you may be limited? Paul was. He was chained to a Roman guard in a prison. He could not get outside the boundaries of that dark cell. The whole world was ready to burst into flames, yet he was not frustrated because the Word of God was not bound. It had been turned loose in society; it was being passed along from person to person. Paul could quietly sit and wait for the results to come in.

One of the things that encourages me greatly about PBC is that because of the preaching of the Word of truth that has gone out from here, letters pour into this place every week from all over the world, telling us of blessing and change, deliverance, freedom and liberty that have come into lives because the Word of God has set people free. If nothing else ever happened in this place, if we never had another successful meeting, the record of what has already gone out would encourage and bless our hearts for years to come. The Word of God is never bound. Though we may be bound, the Scripture is not.

In line with that, the fourth encouragement concerns the deliverance of others (Verse 10):

Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which in Christ Jesus goes with eternal glory. {2 Tim 2:10 RSV}

Some must suffer in order that others might be saved. I do not understand that fully, but that is what the apostle says. He was quite willing, he says, to put up with all the hardness and deprivation of his day, the uncomfortableness of being a prisoner in chains, the lack of adequate food, the loneliness of the many hours,

the boredom that he had to face from many weary, waiting days, because there was the absolute assurance that when he was willing to suffer, others were being delivered as a result. Remember the quotation I gave you a couple weeks ago from Adoniram Judson, the great missionary to Burma, as he pointed out the link between suffering and success:

"If you succeed without suffering, it is because someone else has suffered in order that you might succeed. If you suffer without succeeding, it is in order that someone behind you might succeed without suffering."

The apostle refers to this in many places. In the letter to the Colossians he speaks of being called to "fill up the affliction of Christ for his body's sake" {cf, Col 1:24b}, and how glad he is to do that.

It is an encouragement to know that when we have to go through hard times, pressured times, periled times, somebody is being strengthened, somebody else is going to reap a rich reward of blessing and experience of glory. God does not deal in what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls, "cheap grace." Grace is free to all of us, anybody can take it, but somebody has been involved in the suffering that made it possible. When we sit here in this room, with the open Bible before us, we so easily forget that this Book comes to us saturated with the blood, sweat, and tears of men and women of the past. Men have been burned at the stake that we might have this Book in English, and be able to read it. Men and women have died in chains, they have been tortured, and torn asunder, in order that we might have this Book. We must never forget that, in a fallen world, there is going to be suffering when the Word of truth is dispensed among men. If we are called upon to suffer, then someone else is going to reap the rewards.

The last encouragement is the certainty we have of a crown that awaits (Verses 11-13):

The saying is sure:

If we have died with him, we shall also live with him;

if we endure, we shall also reign with him;

if we deny him, he also will deny us;

if we are faithless, he remains faithful --

for he cannot deny himself. {2 Tim 2:11-13 RSV}

That, undoubtedly, is part of an early Christian hymn which the apostle quotes to encourage us. In God's sight, there is always a direct link between the difficulties we may have as believers here and the joy and glory that await beyond. "If we endure with him, we shall also reign with him"; we have already seen that.

It is wrong to read those verses as though they mean that by your suffering and your enduring hardship you win the right to a crown. That is never the case in the Scriptures. We do not win a reward; we do not merit anything from God ever; no faithful service puts God in our debt and obliges him to give us a reward.

What these verses are saying is that this is a test of the reality of our faith: If we really are Christ's, if he has genuinely come to dwell within us, that fact will always manifest itself by our willingness to suffer with him; to give up some things for Christ's sake, to resolutely set ourselves against the allurements and temptations of this age and live a different lifestyle. That is the manifestation of true Christian life. If that is there, then, of course, it is absolutely certain that we shall share with him because we belong to him.

But if we are not willing to suffer, if the moment our Christianity begins to pinch a little bit -- if we are asked to give up something that we enjoy doing and live in a way that is not approved of, or even laughed at, by the world around us -- we have to wonder if that is not telling us that our Christianity is a fraud. "If we deny him, he also will deny us." He knows what is real and what is not real about us. If we are simply using Christianity to get God to do some nice things for us, this will be the test of it: When the moment of pressure comes we will give Christianity up; we will fade back into the woodwork, as thousands are doing today, under the pressures arising in our time. If that is the case, then he who knew all along what was true of us will, in the hour of manifestation of all the secrets of men's hearts, say to us -- as he said he would say to many who came to him saying, "Lord, Lord, have we not done many mighty works in your name?" -- "Depart from me. I never knew you," {cf, Matt 7:22-23 RSV}.

But, "if we are faithless" -- there is Paul's recognition that even when we do have his life in us, and we are willing to suffer, there are times when we give in, we are weak, we fail and fumble and stumble, we are faithless, like Peter, when he denied his Lord -- "He remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself." If he is in us, he will hold us safe until the end. He will restore us; he will bring us back. He will labor through abundant and wonderful ways to turn us away from that which has temporarily derailed us. He will bring us back at last to humility, to repentance, and confession of our evil, to a restoration, so that we walk on with him by grace.

The apostle is saying here that this life is a testing ground where we have been put, in order to manifest openly before the watching world and creation whether we really are Christians or not. That is the ultimate test.

Those are sobering words. We are coming into the times that try men's souls, times when we need to take these things very seriously. These are the times that test the reality of our faith. Whether we stand or fall is going to determine whether we really have the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and will submit ourselves to the necessary dedication of a soldier, the discipline of an athlete, and the diligence of a farmer, that we might see the results in abundant harvest to the glory of God. That is the Christian life to which we have been called.

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