

Fundamental Christian Attitudes: Strength, Part 2

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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We started out this morning in this series on the anatomy of the church talking about strength, another one of those internal systems, another one of those internal attitudes, spiritual motivations that exist within the body of Christ if it's going to be strong is this whole matter of fortitude, courage, being able to stand for what you believe is true, being willing to face the test and not compromise, principles, uncompromising bold believers. That's really what the Lord is after and they're rare, they really are. You remember this morning as we began our look at 2 Timothy chapter 2 and you can turn back to it. For those of you who weren't here we started discussing this attitude of strength this morning, I apologize in one sense, I've never done this in the twenty-seven years I've preached here, never in all those years have I had a series in which I did in the morning and at night, because I realize that many of the people who come in the morning don't come back at night so they get the front half, and some of the people who come at night weren't here in the morning and they get the back half. Maybe that's a good way to promote the tapes so you can get the whole deal, you can do that.

But in this process of going through this series on the anatomy of the church, I have decided that it would be good for us to just kind of keep the flow going morning and evening. And so we kind of have to make do. But this morning we said that the particular attitude that we're talking about now, we talk about a lot of spiritual attitudes that should exist in the church like faith and love and humility and forgiveness and thanks and joy and contentment and those kinds of virtuous attitudes. And starting today we've begun to talk about this attitude of strength, being a strong person. We started from 1 Corinthians chapter 16 verse 13 where it says, "Be courageous and be strong." And we saw how that particular injunction is very important in the Old Testament. It's what God said to the children of Israel. It's what Moses said to Joshua. It's what Joab said to the Israelites. It's what David said to Solomon. It's what Hezekiah said to the officers of the military who were about to engage in battle with the Assyrians. It's a very familiar expression in the Old Testament, used only once in the New...be courageous, act like men, be strong. Certainly an essential part of spiritual life.

In John's epistle, first epistle, 1 John chapter 2 verse 14 he talks about spiritual young men who are strong because the Word of God abides in them and they have overcome the wicked one. They are strong because the Word of God abides in them. Certainly the Word of God, as we saw this morning, is essential to developing spiritual strength. It's the Word of God that sharpens your convictions and gives you your doctrinal foundation and allows you to stand true and strong and build your life upon the truth with conviction. First Peter 5:10 says that after you've suffered for a little while, the God of

all grace who called you to His eternal glory will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. So strength comes through the crucible of testing and trial and difficulty and persecution and hostility as the Word of God is held to and as it is applied.

So the idea of spiritual strength is an idea that flows throughout the Scripture, starting in the Pentateuch and running all the way to the end. We read even in the book of Revelation that Christians are going to have to stand against the very formidable activity of hostility that is generated by the Antichrist in the end of the age. Always Christians are called to be strong. We're reminded again of Ephesians 6:10, "Be strong in the Lord and the power of His might," which we commented on briefly this morning.

And in that line we have come to 2 Timothy chapter 2 and verse 1 as kind of a major passage to look at where Paul says, "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." The Lord calls us to be strong, not weak but strong, to be able to contend with difficulty, face challenges, meet the enemy, bear the pain, suffer the hardship, uphold what is right, press to the goal, and never compromise our convictions, never equivocate on those things that are true and precious. We are not to be weak and vacillating and defeated and all of that, but rather to take the risk, face the attack, face the difficulty triumphantly, never ever letting go of our faith, of our convictions or of our duties and responsibilities.

Now to find out how that sort of practically fleshes out, we're looking here in 2 Timothy chapter 2 and you can turn to it and we're going to spend the rest of our time looking at these very important verses at the beginning of this chapter. Just another brief word of introduction. Timothy was in a time of weakness when this letter was written. He had been Ephesus for a while now trying to fix the church. It was very difficult to do that, Paul had left him there and told him to straighten out the church. He found it hard because the church resisted that.

He also had the responsibility to preach the gospel in Ephesus and he was to do the work of an evangelist. Paul tells him, reminds him, "Do the work of an evangelist." So when he did that he got hostility from the environment, hostility from the unregenerate community, hostility from the Romans who were beginning to escalate persecution against Christians. So he was being hammered inside the church. He was being hit hard outside the church. And he was really starting to cave in. Paul has to remind him in the first chapter not to be ashamed of the testimony of the Lord, not to be ashamed of Paul, but to join...verse 8...join with me in suffering for the gospel. And here was a man who was to be strong in the midst of suffering. Apparently he was weakening. He was getting sucked into the down draft of the downward spiral of the Ephesian church and he was beginning to weaken under the pressure that was going on in the church and outside. Paul talks a lot in chapter 1 about persecution, reminding Timothy that he should well have anticipated it. He also reminds him at the end of the chapter that a lot of other people had caved in and abandoned Paul.

When you come to chapter 4 and I want to draw you to that because it's also part of the context, as Paul comes to the end of his life, and this is the last letter that he ever wrote, and it was from this experience of this last imprisonment that he was taken to execution. But you notice at the end of chapter 4 verse 16, he says, "At my first offense no one supported me, all deserted me, may it not be counted against them." It wasn't just Timothy who was vacillating, the hostility of the Roman environment against Christianity had caused a lot of people to cave in to the pressure and demonstrate weakness where they should have demonstrated strength. He says in verse 17, in the midst of this loss of all support from anybody else, the Lord stood with me and strengthened me. The Lord was there to infuse the grace of strength into Paul in order that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished. It wasn't just strength to hold up under the persecution, it wasn't just strength to face death and to rest again, it wasn't just strength to take the flack that comes from those who resist the gospel, it was strength in the midst of that environment to fully proclaim the truth so that all Gentiles might here. He wasn't asking for strength to hang on, he was asking for strength to preach in that environment. And he says, "I was delivered out of the lion's mouth, the Lord will deliver me from every deed and bring me safely to His heavenly Kingdom, to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen."

He was so committed to God, he was so committed to the purposes of God that even when everybody forsook him and he stood alone, he never caved in. He is the model of strength. And Timothy in this epistle is called to follow his pattern. Suffer along with me. In verse 5 of chapter 4, "Endure hardship." Look at me, verse 6, I'm already being poured out as a drink offering and the time of my departure has come, I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. And he reminds him in verse 10 of chapter 4 about Demas who caved in, having loved this present world he deserted me and went to Thessalonica. Paul was having a lot of folks around him crash and burn, a lot of them in times that called for great strength were capitulating to the pressure. They weren't exhibiting the strength of conviction, strength of character, the spiritual strength that can stand the test of hostility, both from the church and from the world.

Now Paul was watching Timothy and sensing from what he was hearing that Timothy was getting caught in this downward spiral, in this sad but true trend toward desertion. And he writes the second epistle to prompt Timothy to be strong and that's the thrust of chapter 2 verse 1. "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." When he says "my son," of course he's talking about Timothy as a spiritual son. Timothy came from a Jewish and Gentile background. He was not literally the son of Paul, but was a son in terms of faith. Paul was his mentor, his teacher, his spiritual guide and leader. In fact, he had invested so much in Timothy that Timothy was much like a clone and he had said to the Corinthians, "I'm concerned about you, I'm sending you Timothy who will bring you into remembrance of all my ways, he is so much like me." And as he watches his son begin to cave in to the pressures around him, he calls him in chapter 2 and verse 1 to be strong.

And as we noted this morning, it's not just an exhortation, it's not just some kind of a pep talk. It's not meant to just jack up his emotions. But there's a formidable substance to this strength which Paul defines for him in a rational way, that is in a cognitive way, in a way that can be grasped by his understanding. And he gives him several pictures and they become for us the pictures of a strong Christian. They demonstrate what a strong Christian is like. It's almost as if...if you can get these mental images in your mind, you'll have it. If you want to be strong, first of all he says, you must be a teacher. You must be a teacher. It is in the process of teaching that you become strong. And I told you this morning, and I'll briefly review why that is true. Number one, because if you're going to teach the Word of God to someone else, you have to learn it yourself. And how do believers become strong initially? First John 2:14, "You are strong because the Word of God abides in you." You begin to build a foundation of strength by taking in the solid food of the Word of God. Paul was very concerned, remember, the Corinthians because he couldn't give them meat, he couldn't give them the solid food by which they could mature and become strong, because they had no appetite for it. You begin to become strong when you take in the solid food, that's when you become a spiritual adult and you begin to manifest spiritual strength.

And so, when you teach, you become strong because you start to take in the Word of God in order to teach it. Secondly, I pointed out this morning you begin to come to a clear understanding of that truth. You to teach it must understand it. And so you begin to grip it tightly, you begin to formulate it in your own mind. You begin to clarify it. You go through the process of comparison and contrast and synthesis and analysis and you sort out the meanings and significance of the Word of God and you study it comparatively with other passages and you begin to come to clarity on it. And that's a part of building your convictions.

And thirdly, they become your own. You begin to process them through your own mind. You begin to own them. A very important part of that process. You begin to form your convictions and that's why you want to pass them on. And that fourth step of the teacher, as you pass them on, you elevate yourself as the teacher and therefore you bear the responsibility of being accountable for what you've taught, which also helps to strengthen you.

So the teaching role, the teaching function is in itself a way to build a strong foundation, to crystallize your understanding of Scripture, therefore to form your own convictions. And when you pass them on in the teaching environment, you then elevate your accountability because people are going to hold you to live what you teach. And that's a very healthy thing.

I'm not just talking about preachers and evangelists and missionaries and Bible teachers, I'm talking about all Christians need to be teaching. You need to be studying. You need to be learning. You need to be passing it on. Maybe it's in a Sunday School class with children, or young people. Maybe it's in a discipleship relationship with an individual. Maybe it's in a Bible study with your own family or

friends. Whatever it might be, on a campus, or at work, or someplace, you need to be teaching. That's how you become strong because you are forced to come into the Word of God, to clarify it in your own mind, come to your convictions and then to raise your level of accountability as you pass it on. That is the crucial, crucial feature that begins Paul's imagery of a strong Christian.

Now let's look at the second one in verses 3 and 4. If you're going to be a strong Christian, you have to see yourself not only as a teacher with a responsibility to pass truth on, but you have to see yourself as a soldier, as a soldier. In other words, you've got to go into this whole operation of the Christian life realizing that this is a warfare, that this is a serious warfare, that you are engaged in a great ideological battle. So you understand from the very outset that you're engaging yourself in a hostile environment. The god of this world has blinded the minds of those who don't believe, lest the light of the glorious gospel should shine unto them. So you're dealing with people, if you're talking to people who don't know the Lord, who are blinded by Satan. You're also dealing with the fact that demons have developed power and energy into a system that we know as the cosmos, the world system, and that system presses upon people to appeal to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life and drive them deeper and deeper and deeper into the love of iniquity. You're dealing also with ideological fortresses, according to 2 Corinthians 10, great ideological fortresses that have been built in which people hide themselves behind their false ideologies, false religions, false philosophies, etc. We are dealing with a formidable warfare. We're assaulting the kingdom of darkness and endeavoring to rescue souls and bring them captive to the kingdom of light. We are, as Jude put it, snatching brans from the burning. And this is a profoundly challenging enterprise...but a marvelously and wonderfully rewarding one.

But understand it's a warfare. Paul says in order to engage in this effectively, I have to beat my body to bring it into subjection. I have to do a warfare within my own self so that my own flesh and my own evil desires don't dominate me. I have to be strong in the Lord. I have to be strong in the power of His might. I have to be resolute in my conviction and unwavering. And I have to understand this is war.

And so he says to Timothy in verses 3 and 4, "Suffer hardship with me as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of every day life so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier." Now Paul is simply defining for us the character of Christian living that falls into this sort of paradigm of warfare. We are engaged as soldiers. Point being, you shouldn't be surprised if it isn't easy. You shouldn't be surprised and retreat if there's conflict. This is war and you're a soldier.

Certainly we who are engaged in the teaching of the Word of God understand something about the formidable nature of this war. I've been at this long enough to know that the battle rages on almost incessantly. As you begin to teach the truth in any part of your ministry when you're young and you aren't experienced, there's a certain euphoria, there's a certain thrill, there's a certain joy, a certain

exhilaration as you're just originally gripping truth and you're spinning it out and people are responding. But as you begin to be effective in that, you begin to see the hostilities begin to mount and things begin to change. You might think that the longer you taught the Word of God and the more effectively and the more powerfully, the greater would be your popularity and in fact, probably the opposite is the truth. As you bring the Word of God to bear on an increasingly decadent culture and indifferent church, you begin a greater and greater threat to their false security. And so it may be that they become more hostile as you become more effective. This is war. You shouldn't think it would be easy, it isn't, it's war and that's imagery here.

Now there are a number of things about being a soldier that Paul marks out. The first one is suffer hardship. It is not going to be easy. It's not a cakewalk, it's not a waltz in the park, it's not a skip down the lane, this is war. And war means hardship. It means difficulty. It means a high expenditure of energy. It means a lot of risk. It means that you sort of put your life on the line. It means that you must establish your priorities. It means watchfulness. It means that you look about, understanding that your enemy is a roaring lion, going around seeking whom he may devour. It means understanding the schemes of Satan, the wiles of the devil and his cunning craftiness. It means being able to exercise discernment. As it says in 1 Thessalonians 5, we talked about this a few weeks ago at the NANC Conference, we need to be exposed obviously to prophesying, to prophetic utterance, or to preaching. And we need to listen to that and not despise it. But immediately after that, he says, exercise discernment, examine everything carefully. You are a watchman, you're on reconnaissance, you're sorting out what's coming at you. Everything demands the vigilance and the energy and the risk and the trauma and the difficulty of engaging yourself in a real war.

Now there are some other things about soldiering. Not only in verse 3 does he say suffer hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus, but in verse 4 he adds a couple of other components. There's a certain measure of suffering, obviously, in soldiering. But secondly, there's another element to this. He says no soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of every day life. Another thing that is true about soldiering is that it's a full-time job. When a soldier is called into the military, he has to cut all the cords. You...this is not part time service, this is not being in the reserves where you may or may not ever be called up to active duty. When one goes into the military, he cuts all the cords, all the relationships. He goes to a different place. He lives in a different environment. He dresses differently. He is under the authority and control of people who are all in charge of him every waking moment of his life. He takes orders from beginning to end of his tour of duty. And he must do what he is told to do. He has no personal life. He has no private life, to speak of, when he is engaged as a soldier.

And so it is in the spiritual realm. It is not something that is a part time enterprise. It is a full-time life-long commitment. We have been called to this duty. We have been called to serve the great general, the great king, the Lord Himself and it is a total life involvement. It may take us to very extreme suffering, as in the case of the Apostle Paul, or a much lighter load of suffering as in most of

our cases. But it is nonetheless a war that involves some hardship and involves a total commitment. It's not a part time job.

I'm not saying you don't work. It's just that when you're at work you're a soldier for Christ. I'm not saying you don't go to school. It's just that when you're at school you're a soldier for Jesus Christ. In other words, the primary issue in your mind is the spiritual battle. The primary issue is to confront the issues that must be confronted in that spiritual battle, whether they be the false ideologies in which men entomb themselves, that must come down under the power of the truth. Or whether they be Christians who have gotten themselves involved in false teaching or sin and must be confronted in order that they be rescued from the enemy at that point. Whatever it might be, wherever we are, we're always on duty. There's no time when we can set that duty aside.

There's a third component that he mentions in verse 4 that is true of soldiering and that is that the soldier pleases the one who enlisted him as a soldier. The soldier is singularly responsible to please the commander. Now I never served in the military. In the days that I was, you know, military age as a student, I was an athlete in college and because I was a college athlete on scholarship, I was sort of exempted from that. It was interesting, at the same time, too, I couldn't pass a physical because I had a bad knee and so I was released to go on with my football career. Strange set of circumstances, but that's how it worked out in those days. And then when I became a theological student, I was classified 4-D by the military which at that time, I don't know if it's still the same, was a classification for homosexuals and ministerial students. And I don't know why they came up...they came up with such a combination in the same classification. But I was classified 4-D although I didn't say it publicly because I didn't want anybody to ask the question, I guess, of which category. Anyway, I escaped military duty.

I've read enough books, I've been exposed to enough data and information on the military to know how it functions fairly well. I've read some of the great tomes that have been written about one of my ancestors, a not too distant one by the name of General Douglas MacArthur and his approach to military life. I've read other things through the years that have exposed me to that. I've been exposed to a number of military documentaries and people's experiences. It's not as if I don't understand that, but I don't have a firsthand experience. I suppose the closest thing would be my athletic experience and my responsibility to the coaches who in my mind were the generals and I was a part of that army. And I remember some very, very painful experiences in my athletic life when I violated what pleased the commander and paid the price in no uncertain terms.

If you're going to soldier, you have to realize that there's only real one person that you're concerned about and that one person is the commander, the one to whom you are answerable...the one to whom you are answerable. And certainly it is true of the Apostle Paul and of all faithful servants that they served with a view toward that day when they would face the commander. They served with a view to the day when they would hopefully be able to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant," or

good and faithful soldier. And that's exactly what Paul is saying to Timothy and to us. You want to be a strong Christian? Understand this, it is a war and you are called to suffer. And when it's difficult, that's because it's war. You shouldn't be surprised by that, you shouldn't be shocked, you're a soldier, you have been prepared for this, you have been armed for this. And I'm going to say more about that next Sunday when we get into the armor of the Christian which is a part of our spiritual strength. You have the preparedness, you have the equipment, you have the weaponry, you are trained for this, you are energized for this. Now get out there and engage yourself in the conflict, remembering what we read earlier today in the Old Testament, "Greater is the one who is with us than the one who is with them," or in New Testament terms, "Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world." That's why the Apostle Paul fought mightily due to the strength of the Spirit strengthening him in the inner man. So it's clear to us that the second picture here, the second biblical paradigm that he wants us to view ourselves in is that of a soldier.

Let's look at the third one in verse 5, "Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules." The third imagery here is that of an athlete. The Greek verb actually is the verb *athleo* from which we get the transliterated English word *athlete*. If you were to take that verb *athleo* which in the NAS is translated *competes as an athlete*, and translate it sort of in the original English, it would simply say, as the King James puts it, "to strive for the triumph...to strive for the victory." It means that. It means to strive. And now we begin to look at the imagery of the athlete here and the first thing we see about an athlete is that he competes to win. He strives for the triumph. That's how the King James, I think, says *strives for the masteries*, or *strives for the victory*. And that's exactly what it's intending to say.

An athlete does what he does with a view to the victory. He competes in order to win. I mean, that's essential in athletics. Anything less than that will render you a terrible kind of dishonor.

Now a lot of people like to run, for example, they just run around. I see them all the time. I have a hard time understanding that. They just get on some running clothes and go run. And when they're done with what they want to do, they go back and clean up and that's it. And they run with little things in their ears, and you know how it goes, and they listen to all sorts of stuff, but they just run to run. I suppose it's sort of like playing basketball on a court with no hoops. You just dribble for a while and then leave. Or maybe it's like playing baseball without a ball. You just get up there and swing and run around the bases until you're tired and then leave.

Personally, I like games with a goal. I like a hoop and a finish line and a ball. I guess that's why I'm not real good and just plain exercise because nobody wins. You understand what I'm saying. There's something about competition. There's something about an objective. There's something about a goal. There's something about achieving an end. That's what drives athletes. And that's what Paul is after here. He really is not interested in evangelical joggers. He really is not interested in spiritual treadmill walkers. Or worst of all, stationary bikes. You've just finished five miles, and you

know something? You're in the same place you were when you started. You can't even bring home anything cause you haven't gone anywhere.

The Apostle Paul is not interested in that. The Apostle Paul is interested in the kind of person who understands that there is an objective. And he's striving because there is that objective. And that driving objective is a crown of glory which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give and He'll give it to all those who have run to the maximum of their ability because they understand what is on the other side. They run for that eternal reward. They run for that eternal crown. They run to hear that "well done." They run that they may receive that reward. And certainly that was true of the Apostle Paul. He says, "I have fought the good fight, I finished the course." Why did you run? "Because there's a crown of righteousness out there." And when I box, he says, I don't shadow box, 1 Corinthians 9, I hit the opponent as hard as I can in the right spot. And when I run, I run to obtain, not a corruptible crown, not some...some leaf crown, I don't run to obtain a corruptible crown, but...what? An incorruptible crown, a crown that never will fade away.

You know, all great athletes have a view to the triumph. All great athletes see the end. And they live and they work in the light of that end. And I think it's true with great Christians. There's something beyond the moment. It's not just for personal satisfaction. That's not enough. It's not just for personal reputation or personal fulfillment. There's something much greater that makes people live at that level of dedication that causes them to rise above the crowd. Those noble Christians, those Christians who make a difference, those Christians who impact, those Christians who seem to be always eager to serve, always eager to stand in and help, always eager to teach or to assist or whatever it might be, or faithful in the Word, or faithful in prayer, and always seem to be at it, and at it, and at it, and continually at it. And the reason is because there's something out there far more compelling than those things that drive the spiritual treadmill walkers, which is personal fulfillment. There's something much farther and much greater than that. They do it to obtain, even in this world, a corruptible crown, and we do it to obtain an incorruptible crown. We do it so that there might be the glory of the Lord from those people who have come to know Him through our efforts, we do it in order that the church might be everything that would please and honor Him. We work hard because we understand the spiritual goals that are at stake. I love what Paul said in 1 Timothy 4, it's just a tremendous statement. He says, "Look, bodily discipline is only of little profit," 1 Timothy 4:8, "bodily discipline is only of little profit." What does he mean by that? It only profits in a temporal way. It only profits you here and now, bodily exercise. I mean, that's good, that's all right, it's not bad, but it's minimal. Godliness is profitable for all things. Why? "Because it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." If you're going to pursue something, pursue godliness, it has eternal impact.

And then he says, "This is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance." Why is this so important? Why? "For it is this for which we labor and strive." There's that same term, that same idea, we strive, we labor, why? "Because we have fixed our hope on the living God." In other words,

we have our affections on heaven and not on the earth. That's what makes people run. They see a goal in mind.

I always...always respect the athlete who pays the supreme price to be the best in the world because there is a price. And it's not a difference in talent. At that level, the talent is measurably similar. There's something about winners that makes them go beyond everybody else...the passion to triumph. And it's certainly true in the spiritual realm.

If you're going to be a strong Christian, you've got to get out yourself and beyond yourself to a goal that is beyond you, a goal that is a heavenly goal, a reward that is an incorruptible and eternal reward, and that's going to cause you to make the necessary sacrifices to run to the very best of your ability.

And then there's another component here in verse 5 as regards to the athlete that I would mention to you. Not only does he run to win, but he doesn't win the prize unless he competes according to the rules. We have, because of the tremendous media exposure to the last several Olympics, all of us have become familiar with those people who cheat, those people who are so terribly dishonored, not only themselves but their whole country bears the shame when they break the rules.

We knew, it's been confirmed lately, we knew that through the years of the Iron Curtain in Europe that the Eastern German women were bulking up and gaining immense strength on steroids, and now in the press in the recent months it's come to light that indeed, in fact, that is exactly the case. They were breaking all the rules of drug allowances and drug tolerances, violating them all at the time for whatever reasons they were able to escape. We found out in the last Olympics that the Chinese athletes had been engaged in very similar things. We remember the story of the fencer whose foil was rigged and so he was scoring when he wasn't actually hitting his opponent. We remember Ben Johnson, the great Canadian sprinter, who violated the rules and was terribly discredited and along with him his nation was shamed for breaking the rules.

You don't win the prize unless you keep the rules. There's a marvelous discipline, there's a wondrous discipline in athletics at that point. There's a certain honor. There's a certain integrity that has to be there. I'm always greatly respectful of the golfer who turns himself in for some minute violation. Now we don't all have to play golf like that because we're not competing on a professional level. But there's...I just want to say that so you all don't get carried away. If you kick a twig and it costs you two strokes and a hundred twenty-five thousand dollars on a PGA tour, that's one thing. But it something...there's something to be said for that kind of honor even in the human realm. And we could wish for that same kind of honor among the people of God. Nothing to me is more tragic than when somebody is running the race as an athlete and just violates the rules.

Two...I guess three weeks ago a dear friend called me from his church in Florida and he said, "I just had a horrible experience this morning in my church." And I said, "What was it?"

He said, "My pastor got up like he always does and he's very loved by the congregation, he's had a good ministry, and he announced to us that he had been unfaithful to his wife." And he said, "We're just all devastated." And he said, "I thought I ought to call you and tell you because you know him."

In fact when the pulpit committee was talking about calling him, they contacted me and asked me if I knew him, and I said I did and everything I know about him is good, and I said I don't have present personal contact, but I certainly respect and admire his ministry. And here is a terrible, terrible discrediting.

That's why Paul in 1 Corinthians 9 says, "I beat my body to bring it into subjection." Why? That's part of athletics, that kind of self-discipline. It's necessary. Paul says I have to do it so that in preaching to others I myself don't become disqualified by some sinful abuse.

If you're going to be an athlete, you're going to run to win. You've got to have a goal out there that's beyond yourself and it has to be something that's transcendent enough and compelling enough to drive you...to drive you. When you set your affections on things above and when the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ and the eternal reward that awaits those who are faithful will be given to you and in turn you can take it and give it back to Him and cast it at His feet, when you're moved by that it will draw out of you all the best you have to offer.

Well then, there's verse 6, and here we have the fourth picture that Paul gives to Timothy of a strong Christian, he is first of all a teacher, and he is given the responsibility to pass on truth by which he himself is strengthened. Secondly he is a soldier, he is armed and armored for this. He is willing to suffer hardship. He disentangles himself from the affairs of every day life and he does what he does to please the commander. He is an athlete who has a goal in mind, a transcendent goal that makes him set aside the weights and all the encumbrances so that he can run with alacrity and speed. And he always keeps the rules. And now we find him defined as a farmer.

And first thing it says, he is a hard-working farmer. What do farmers do? Very simple? They sow seed and they harvest it. Very simple. It's a magnificent imagery. And it's really what we do. We sow seed and we harvest it. That's hard work, by the way. The hard working farmer is busy sowing seed, he's busy sowing seed. Now if you in your mind can go back to Matthew chapter 13, you remember in Matthew 13 the parable of the soils? It's a very magnificent parable and it tells us something that you cannot forget. It is this, very simple lesson, there are all kinds of soils. Some of them will reject the truth and some of them will receive it. That's what that tells us. There were six soils in that parable. There was hard ground which immediately rejected the truth. There was weedy ground in which the truth found some welcome, began to grow, sprouted up a little bit, at least the

stalk did and the sun came out and burned it and it died because there was no depth...rather the stony ground, not the weedy, that's the third one. The stony ground literally means a rock bed under the soil and the roots couldn't go down and they went as far as they could, couldn't get to the moisture, the sun burned and it died. The third one was the weedy or thorny ground where when the farmer tilled the ground he didn't get the weeds out and the weeds grew faster than the grain and choked it out and killed it.

Those are three negative responses. Some people are hard, they just react immediately with indifference. And they have no hearing of the Word. Some people hear it and they respond with joy for a little while, when tribulation comes they disappear. Some people respond momentarily but the love of the world and the deceitfulness of riches takes over the noxious weeds of materialism and the seed is choked out.

But then there are three good soils and some produce a hundred fold, and some sixty fold, and some thirty fold. So you have six soils. Now it's all about soils. What is most wonderful about that parable is it doesn't say anything about the skill of the sower. Nothing about it. It isn't a parable that says...now look, if you want to win the world, folks, if you want to be effective in evangelism, here's what you need to do...you've got to learn how to throw seed. Sower number one did this, and he wasn't very good. Sower number...it doesn't tell that, that's not the story. It has nothing to do with the skill of the sower because it's not the skill of the sower, it's the state of the soil. Okay?

To put the illustration in a simple and graphic figure. Imagine a very skilled farmer sowing seed and he's very good at it. He's got good dexterity, he's done it all his life. He reaches in his pouch and he scatters it almost perfectly in the rows. Behind him is his son who is five or six years old and his father has made him a little pouch, he's got a little fat hand with short fingers like little guys have. And he doesn't do it very well, he throws it in his father's hair, down his father's back, all over the place, chunks of it here, chunks of it there. The bottom line is the little guy isn't very good at it. But here's the principle. Whenever seed hits good soil it produces fruit, whether thrown by the skilled sower or the unskilled one. It is not the skill of the sower that makes the difference, it's the condition of the soil. The Lord plows the soil, you throw the seed. The moral of that story is, the more seed you throw the more likely you are to hit soil that is prepared, right? So throw as much seed as you can in as many directions as possible. Work hard at it. Never pass up an opportunity to speak a word for the gospel, whether it's hard ground, whether it's temporarily responsive or whatever...just keep throwing seed.

You say, "I'm not very good at it." The Word has its own power, simply present the gospel that men are sinners, they're headed for a godless eternity of punishment, there's only one hope for the forgiveness of sin, and heaven, and that is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who died on the cross and rose again, give the simple truth of the gospel. Point them to the Word of God. Let the seed do its work. You don't need to mess with the seed and you can't determine the soil, all you can do is throw the truth. The more you do it the more likely you are to hit the good ground.

I never cease to be amazed-amazed at how people respond. Sitting on an airplane, reading my Bible, a guy sitting next to me looks at me and says, this is an actual statement, "Say, I see you have a Bible." "I do." He says, "You wouldn't know how I could have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, would you?"

I said, "Yes." And away we went. There was good soil...good soil. Our young people from the Master's College went on a mission's trip during missions week to Utah and met a young man from a polygamist Mormon family. His father has six wives and fifty-seven children of which he is one. And the young people from the college made friends with this young man and just loved him in Christ and presented the truth to him. And they had such a great impact that he came to the Master's College this week to visit them. I guess many weeks since our missions conference. He wanted to come down and see them again. And this week he opened his heart and embraced Jesus Christ. And he told me after I spoke at chapel on Friday, he said, "I can't...I've only been a Christian I think two days, or three days," he said, "and I can't tell you how many things have become completely clear to me since I've been saved."

You don't know where the good soil is. God knows and God plows. And sometimes it's in very unlikely places. But hard working farmers just keep sowing seeds. You want to be a strong Christian, work hard at sowing the seed. Work hard at harvesting. Work hard, if I can extend the metaphor, at watering, building on somebody else's sowing.

There's a second compelling issue about farmers. Not only do they sow seed, but as I said, they harvest it. They're to be the first to receive their share of the crops. You know what, this is really good, the good part of farming, you get to bring in the crop. Boy, that is a compelling thing to me. I love that. That is such an exhilarating joy. That is such a wonderful reality to be involved in leading people to Christ. That's one of the reasons I love to sow seed because I like the harvest. Don't you? Is anything more exciting than leading someone to Jesus Christ? Anything more exciting than finding out that in some heart where you sowed the seed God allowed it to grow into eternal life?

That's what we do, we're farmers. We sow seed...we sow seed. And God produces life and we taste the harvest. Tremendous joy.

Well, my time is gone. Just sum it up. You want to be a strong Christian? Here's the image. Here's the image. Be a teacher, be a soldier, be an athlete, be a farmer. Now listen carefully as I close. Four pictures, you got them? Let me roll them into one. Just need one picture. Verse 7, "Consider what I say for the Lord will give you understanding in everything." Paul is..that's just a way of saying get this, will you? Let me drive this one in. Let me drive this home. You've got to understand this. How, Paul? "Remember Jesus Christ." Why does he say that? You tell me. Who is the greatest teacher that ever walked the earth? Jesus Christ. Who's the greatest soldier, fought the greatest

battle, won the greatest victory? Who's the greatest athlete, ran the greatest race, won the greatest crown and never broke a rule? Who's the true farmer who really plants the seed and brings in the harvest and gets all the glory? Jesus.

Paul says...Look, consider what I say and the Lord give you understanding. And if you want that understanding, just take all four pictures, roll them into one and remember Jesus Christ. He's your model. Was He a teacher? Was He a teacher, a faithful teacher who always spoke the truth, who always penetrated every situation with the truth? Did He pass it on so that others could pass it on? Yes. Was He the soldier? Was He always in the battle? Was He always waging war against the lies and the deception and the enemy? Yes. Is He the athlete who runs the truest, purest race with the greatest amount of effort, never distracted from that final goal, always doing what He did to please the Father who sent Him? Never breaking a rule? Absolutely. Is He the one who always sows the seed? Is He the one who energizes every sowing that ever takes place and gets credit for every harvest and rejoices in every harvest eternally? Indeed He is.

So summing it up its right back to where you thought we might get. If you're a strong Christian, you're going to look a lot like Christ, increasingly being conformed into His image. That's the way the church needs to be, strong, in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And we end up in verse 8 where we started in verse 1.

Father, thank You for our time tonight. It's been so refreshing to be with Your saints, to be with Your beloved people, so refreshing to sing songs of praise and hear songs of testimony and hear the words of these young people who have spoken of Your love for them and Your work in their hearts. And it's been challenging to hear again that You want us to be strong. Lord, I pray to that end that the people of this congregation may be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus and not get caught in the weakness of the church of today. May we never lose the love that has to go alongside our strength, we can act like men and be strong, always maintaining an attitude of love. But, Lord, keep us strong for Your glory and Your honor, in Christ's name. Amen.

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