

## A Leader's Character (Part 1) 2 Timothy 2:1-13

This is a picture of Belisarius, a Roman general and one of history's greatest yet least known leaders. 500 years after Christ as Rome and its Western Empire was collapsing and the capital of the empire was moved to Constantinople, Belisarius saved Western civilization on at least three separate occasions. He recaptured Rome after it fell to the barbarian hordes and reclaimed Roman territories lost to the barbarians, winning brilliant victories at Carthage, Naples, Sicily, and Constantinople all before he reached the age of 40. Yet the jealous Roman Emperor Justinian refused to acknowledge Belisarius' contributions but repeatedly accused him of coveting the throne even after Belisarius both saved Justinian from an angry mob of Roman citizens and refused the crown of Rome which the Goths offered to him if he would ally himself with them against the emperor. Eventually Justinian relieved Belisarius of his command, gave him the deliberately humiliating title, "Commander of the Royal Stable", stripped him of his wealth, and according to legend, had him blinded and forced to beg in the streets to survive. For centuries, those who hear his story are shocked by the way this true hero of Rome and of the church was treated. The one person we never hear any complaints from is Belisarius. While Justinian became the slave to all the vices of absolute power— ego, paranoia and greed—Belisarius just did his job, did it well and that was enough for him. Belisarius did have one last run. He was found innocent of Justinian's charges and his honors restored— just in time to save the empire again as a white haired old man. However the Emperor then charged him again with plotting against him and Belisarius died impoverished and disabled. Yet in Longfellow's poem about Belisarius, as he reaches the end of his life he still concludes with tremendous strength, "*This, too, I can bear;—I still am Belisarius!*" Great leaders typically are individuals of strong character simply because leaders – like Justinian - of weak character don't survive the temptations, the opposition, and the hardships which inevitably come with leadership. That's why the theme of Paul's second letter to Timothy is "Be strong." In fact, the command to be strong appears in one form or another over 20 times in this brief letter. In the dark days of the first century when the government of Rome declared war on the church, Christians were routinely tortured and killed by Nero and believers either renounced their faith or went underground. It was also a time when many believers were turning from the gospel to embrace new, heretical ideas. The Church desperately needed strong, courageous leadership and that is why Paul writes this letter to his good friend, Timothy, the pastor of the church in Ephesus. And that's why in chapter 2 as Paul reminds Timothy of the character of a leader he presents 6 pictures of strength of character: a soldier, an athlete, a farmer, a craftsman, a vessel and a servant. We will look at the first three pictures this morning. In vs. 1-2 we see Paul's call to Timothy to be strong, then in verses 3-7 Paul gives Timothy three pictures of the kind of strength he needs. God used this passage to call me into the ministry in 1970 and it has always been a special one for me. But until last week I never noticed that the strength Paul is talking about is strength of character. I used to think of spiritual power as the ability to do the miraculous, tapping into the force like Yoda or Dr. Strange. God still occasionally displays His power by doing miracles like He did through Jesus and the apostles. But the most common way God's power is seen is in the strength of His people's character. Paul prays for the Colossians that they may be "*strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience;*" (Col. 1:11) and that's the kind of strength Paul is talking to Timothy about here and the kind of strength every believer has access to and has been called to exhibit to the world.

Let's look at Paul's call to Timothy to be strong in vs. 1-2. "*You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.*" Paul awaits execution in a Roman dungeon, deserted by almost everybody he knows. Nero is arresting and killing as many Christians as his troops can their lay hands on and throughout the Empire Christians are going underground. Within the church, error and false teaching is at an all time high. The need for strong leadership has never been greater and so Paul writes, "*You, therefore my son,*" – in contrast with Phygelus and Hermogenes and all the other church leaders who have jumped ship whom Paul mentioned in chapter 1 – "*you be strong.*" What kind of strength is Paul talking about here? I made a list contrasting strength of character with weakness of character based upon the commands Paul gives Timothy in this letter. A strong person is confident, a

weak person is timid. A strong person is steady, a weak person vacillates. A strong person is self-disciplined, a weak person self-indulgent. A strong person is resilient, a weak person gives up easily. A strong person is grounded while a weak person is flighty. A strong person is courageous and self-sacrificing while a weak person is cowardly and self-protective. A strong person is calm while a weak person is easily unhinged. A strong person is reliable while a weak person is undependable. A strong person never gives up, gives in or backs off while a weak person is quick to surrender. That's strength of character and the way the Spirit of Christ displays Himself in the life of His children and the kind of strength every one of us needs every day. A couple of months after I became a Christian, I told one of my fraternity brothers what I had done and he said, "Yeah, you have seemed to be a lot more grounded recently," which was something I was completely unaware of; yet the first evidence of Christ in me which my friend saw in me was a new strength and stability.

Where do we find that kind of strength? Paul makes it clear that he's not calling Timothy to be strong in his own strength but in God's strength. Literally Paul says, "Be strengthened in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Grace always refers to what God does for us that we cannot do for ourselves. Only Jesus can live a Christlike life; and the Christian life is trusting Jesus to live that life in us. That's why Paul tells the Ephesians, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might." (Eph. 6:10) The strength we need comes from God but we must cooperate with Him to experience that strength – which is why vs. 1 is a *command* to Timothy; "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." God saves us from our sins through grace when we trust Him and He empowers us to live a life we are incapable of living through grace when we trust Him. It is a partnership. As Jeff pointed out last week, we don't make the car move, the engine moves the car. But we still have to press on the accelerator. Christ provides all the strength we need if I cooperate. So how do I press down on the accelerator? My job is to connect daily with Jesus through hearing His voice in His word and prayer and then trust Him to give me the power and courage and wisdom to do what He says. And by the way, He never gives me what I need until I need it. I don't have the strength I'll need an hour from now. He only gives me the strength I need now. I won't feel His strength until I need His strength. It is only as I choose to do what He calls me to do and believe that He will give me the strength I need when I need it that I experience that strength. But if I neglect Him because I think I can handle life on my own or imagine that the strength in me comes from me, then like Samson after his hair was cut, I become like any other man. Our men's bible study was discussing Genesis 41 when Pharaoh brings Joseph out of prison to interpret a couple of dreams Pharaoh had. Joseph is bathed and shaved and given a change of clothes and then taken into the court where one of the most powerful rulers of the world of that time says, "I hear you can interpret dreams." Joseph replies, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer." That's what being strong in the grace of Christ Jesus looks like; "it's not me, it's Him;" a complete lack of confidence in yourself combined with a total confidence in God. I loved what Gordon Lam, one of the guys in our study, said that night, "I don't want to be the donkey who thinks the palm branches are for me." If we're still the hero of our story, then we don't yet really believe that it is not in us; that apart from Him we can do nothing and yet with Him we can do all things. Do you need Jesus this morning? Why? What lies before you today that you know you are incapable of but that He is completely capable of? Being strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus means remembering where our strength lies and acting like it.

Now notice why Timothy needs to be strong. *"The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."* (2 Tim. 2:2) Timothy needs God's strength because he's on a mission for God. The guys at Crossfit talk about functional strength; strength that's necessary to accomplish work. Do you know people who work out just to look good but when you need someone to help you move, they're nowhere to be found? Their body looks impressive but isn't real useful in accomplishing anything. Crossfit works on building the muscles that enable you to actually get stuff done; carrying heavy things, being able to keep going without rest, flexibility, core strength, stuff like that. In the same way the strength of character which God supplies isn't given just to make us look good or to have a happier life. It is functional strength, strength for the mission He has sent every one of us on, to make reproducing disciples of Jesus and teaching others who will teach others. 2 Timothy is written at the end of the age of the apostles. Paul is passing on the baton of leadership and Timothy's mission is to train more teachers so that the gospel will continue to spread. The two most prominent preachers of 18<sup>th</sup> century England were John Wesley and George Whitfield and most people acknowledged that Whitfield was the superior communicator. Benjamin Franklin raved about Whitfield's ability to hold a crowd of thousands absolutely spellbound in a time when there was no amplification or

microphones. On both sides of the Atlantic, people flocked to hear Whitfield preach and many people turned to Christ as a result. Yet for all the immense crowds and eloquent sermons, Whitfield had little to show for it by the end of his life – because he ignored 2 Tim. 2:2. Whitfield focused on his own preaching and teaching rather than training others to teach and when he was old, he said, “My brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in societies, (what we call community groups today) and thus preserved the fruit of his labor. This I neglected and my people are a rope of sand.” Wesley focused on getting those who came to Christ through his preaching into community with other believers and training them to do exactly what he did; to preach the gospel in fields, town squares, homes and wherever else they could and as the number of preachers and teachers multiplied, the impact of his ministry grew until all of England was changed. Prior to Wesley, 18th century England was a mess. Poverty, debtor’s prisons and child labor were wide spread as the rich systemically exploited the poor. One out of every four women was a prostitute, many of them as young as eight years old. Thousands of the English died annually from syphilis and gonorrhea. Crime, alcoholism and domestic violence were common on every street. The slave trade was the nation’s primary industry and Britain was on the verge of revolution. Yet as Wesley and those whom he trained preached the gospel, revival broke out as more and more of the English turned to Christ, repented of their sins, and British society began to change. Slavery and child labor were abolished, care and justice for the poor became the norm and neighborhood pubs went out of business because of a lack of customers. Teaching others what we have learned so that they will teach others is the mission God has given to every Christian and when the church takes the mission seriously, entire cultures are radically changed. The mission simple but very difficult; otherwise everybody would be doing it. Every Christian parent would like their children to walk with Christ but teaching them regularly is a lot of work. Every Christian would love to reproduce his or her walk with Christ in someone else – if only it didn’t take so much time and work and heartbreak. That’s why a lot more Christians begin making disciples than keep on making disciples. It’s easy to give up when progress is slow. Other things take our time and energy. And as we learned in our series in John 15, we can’t make disciples, only Jesus can. That’s why Timothy needs divine strength for his mission. This mission is humanly impossible. These two verses are a great definition of effective leadership. An effective leader must be strong and must have a vision for what he or she is to accomplish. A leader without a vision is not a leader nor is a leader without the strength to accomplish that vision a leader. We learned in John 15 that God has called each of us to the same life of reproduction and disciple-making as He called Timothy and that means we all need strength of character and vision. And that is why we can learn from the six pictures of strength and vision Paul now gives to Timothy. Each is a picture of stern self-discipline in the service of some great goal. Today we’ll look at the first three pictures; the soldier, the athlete and the farmer.

The first picture of strength and vision which Paul presents to Timothy is that of the professional soldier’s dedication in verses 3-4. *“Suffer hardship with {me,} as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.”* My nephew, Timothy is a captain in the Air Force where he serves as a physician and his last deployment was to Afghanistan. Timothy is a committed believer and I asked him what vs. 3-4 meant to him from a soldier’s perspective. He said was that being in the military means losing the right to have the final say in many of the important decisions of your life which civilians take for granted; where I will live or what kind of work I will do; and this aspect of military service has been true of professional soldiers throughout history. Timothy didn’t get to choose where he and his family would live and he’s been stationed in Mississippi and in Northern California. And he would have preferred to not spend almost a year in Afghanistan apart from his wife and kids; but that’s the life of a soldier because a soldier gives up the final say in most aspects of his life. He must leave while others stay. He can’t quit when others can walk away. He doesn’t always work a 9-5 day because his time is not his own. He is always on call and must be ready for the next mission whenever it comes. He cannot engage in many of things civilians are free to engage in if he wants to be a good soldier. Civilians can let their body go and get out of shape but the soldier must be constantly working out so he is ready for his next assignment. Civilians can become absorbed in the pleasures and responsibilities of everyday life but he must avoid any commitments which might hamper his availability. Civilians live to avoid hardship but he must embrace them and be ready to suffer whatever is necessary for the mission. And Paul says that the soldier does all this to please the one who has enlisted him as a soldier. That’s his goal. That was particularly true in the Roman army where a commander would gather men around him who knew him, loved him, trusted him and would follow him anywhere. Those commanders won the great battles for Rome because of the dedication of their men not only to the profession but to them personally.

They loved their commander and wanted to please him and that's the way Paul says Christians are to live. Our love for Jesus should make us at least as dedicated to His mission for our life as the soldier is to his. So when Paul tells Timothy to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus so that he can fulfill the mission Christ has assigned, he means be as dedicated to Jesus as a professional soldier is to his commander which means we also give up the final say about where we will live and how we will spend our time. So ask yourself, do I decide where to live or what to buy or what obligations I assume as a soldier or as a civilian? I've discovered that being used by God is seldom convenient or comfortable but if I want to please Christ, I need to take the opportunities whenever He chooses to send them. And I must avoid any entanglements which could restrict my availability. So many of the most important decisions we make in life is not between right and wrong but between what contributes to and what distracts from my availability to my Master for His use. Second, do I expect hardship or do I resent it? The professional soldier expects hardship because he is in the hardship business. War is hard and suffering comes with the territory. So it is with the spiritual battle as well. The follower of Jesus must expect suffering and hardship to be a good soldier of Christ. The good fight is no place for soft, comfort-seeking, convenience-worshipping, risk-adverse civilians. It can only be fought by tough, self-denying, can't-be-stopped soldiers of the cross who love Jesus more than comfort, respect or reputation. So what does being as dedicated as a professional soldier mean to you? It's all about availability because the mission God has for us depends more on our availability for whatever the mission requires than it does on our ability. How available are you to Christ to walk through the doors He may open, to take the opportunities He gives and to speak to whomever He may send you to speak? That's why we need His strength.

Paul's second picture of strength and vision is the discipline of the Olympic athlete in verse 5. *"Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules."* The ancient Olympic Games were held in Greece between 776 BC and 396 AD. Every four years a truce was called between the city states of Greece and each city chose athletes to represent them who would compete for the prize of an olive wreath and the honor attached to that prize. Paul says that those who win that prize do so because they compete according to the rules. I would think they won because they were the fastest or the strongest but Paul says the champion wins because he was the most disciplined athlete. In order to participate in the games, athletes had to complete a ten-month training period during which they followed strict rules of diet, sleep, exercise and rigorous preparation so that they could best represent their city and they had to sign an oath that they had done so before they were allowed to compete. That's what Paul means when he writes that the athlete does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules of rigorously disciplining and preparing himself for the competition. Paul uses the picture of the athlete's training and discipline to win the prize as another picture of the strength of character a believer needs to fulfill our mission. An athlete trains for two reasons; to make his mind and body stronger and to develop the necessary skills he needs for his event so that those skills become second nature in the heat of competition. Paul often uses the discipline of the world class athlete as a picture of the discipline the believer needs to exercise. In 1 Timothy 4:7, Paul tells Timothy to "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness," and the word, Paul uses for "discipline" is literally "train as an athlete." To achieve her mission, the Christian needs to discipline herself the same way an Olympic athlete disciplines himself. That's why Paul – again using the picture of the Olympic athlete - writes in 1 Cor. 9 that he buffets his body and make it his slave lest after preaching to others he might be disqualified from winning the prize just as an athlete would be disqualified because he broke training. I have known gifted Christian leaders who were taken out of the race because they could not control their eating or their sex drive or their insecurities or their ambition or their greed. The strength of character Paul continues to illustrate is a stern self-discipline in the pursuit of a worthy goal. I've discovered the older I get, the more disciplined I must become in my eating, exercise, study and daily putting to death the sin which tries to defeat me. Sin doesn't just disappear on its own. We have to train ourselves to defeat it, and every temptation is an opportunity to practice getting it right. So where do you need to train? What do you need to practice? Godliness is impossible without training and discipline and one of the primary ways God's strength is experienced is through self-discipline. Are there things you know you shouldn't be doing but are; or that you should be doing but are not? Then remember the athlete.

Paul's third picture of strength and vision is the diligence of a farmer in verse 6. *"The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops."* My first full-time job was working in an orange grove 12 hours a day, six days a week where I learned that farming is incredibly labor intensive, especially during the growing season. Crops must be daily irrigated, weeded, and protected from pests and everyday is a work day until the harvest. And the farmer labors in faith since the harvest is never guaranteed. So why does Paul say that the hardworking farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops? Most farmers did not own the land they farmed and paid the owners of the land rent by sharing the harvest with them. The just landowner would give the hardworking farmer his fair share of the crops but the unjust would take most of it for himself, leaving the farmer just enough for him and his family to survive for another year. Paul is repeating what Jesus said, "The worker is worthy of his wage," that a worker's labor should be fairly rewarded and I think that is Paul's point here. The ministry of multiplication is hard work and will require the same hard work that farming requires but God is just and will reward our hard labor. You know, my greatest regret is that I have not labored as hard as I could have on the ministry God has called me to because I mistook grace for God causing everything to happen without my participation rather than the power God gives me to do what needs to be done on my part to make reproducing disciples. Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:10, *"By the grace of God I am what I am and His grace did not prove vain toward me for I labored more than all of them, yet not I but the grace of God with me."* Grace does not make labor unnecessary; grace makes labor possible. One simple difference I see between people whom God seems to use and people whom He doesn't is just plain old hard work. I have yet to see anybody who doesn't work hard make an impact for Jesus. When we work, God works. How about you? Do you work as hard on making disciples as successful people in the world work at their occupations? Me neither – but imagine how the world would change if we did.

Paul tells Timothy that he needs strength of character and vision because the mission God has given him requires the dedication of the soldier, the discipline of the athlete and the diligence of the farmer. Paul adds, *"Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything,"* which is what we have been doing this morning; considering what Paul wrote. That's one of the primary ways the Lord speaks to us; as we think about the Scriptures and how they apply to our life. So what is the Lord telling you this morning? Do you need to be stronger or more mission-focused or more dedicated person or more disciplined person or more diligent person? We all do and that's why we need to remember that it is not our strength we need but His. "You my son, you my daughter, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Grace is God's power in our behalf to do for us what we can't do; and that's the heart of the gospel. Paul writes in Eph. 2:8-9, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God and not a result of works so that no one may boast."* Christians are not people who think they are better or stronger or holier than others. Christians are just people who know they can't save themselves and trust in Jesus' death and resurrection on our behalf to save us. And just as we are saved by grace through faith, we live by grace through faith. Belisarius was a follower of Jesus and knew the strength of His grace. That is why he could say as he died in disgrace, *"This too I can bear."* But unlike the words Longfellow put in his mouth, if Belasarius said anything at the end of his life, he would add, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*