

# **Sermon**

**28 February 2016**

**West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood**

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**Text: 2 Timothy 2:1-13**

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A soldier, an athlete and a farmer... It almost sounds like the beginning of a joke! But actually, it's quite serious – it's the apostle Paul trying to explain to Timothy, and all of us, what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

What do a soldier, an athlete and a farmer have in common with each other? Discipline; perseverance; and commitment.

And that's what we need as Christians as well. Paul starts this section of his letter to Timothy with the words: "You then, my son, *be strong* in the grace that is in Jesus Christ... Tell others what I have taught you. *Endure hardship*".

Paul is writing this letter to Timothy, who is in Ephesus, while he is in prison in Rome. Locked up because the non-Christian government didn't agree with what he said and how he lived his life.

At this point in his life Paul had been through a lot for the sake of sharing the good news of Christ with everyone who wanted to listen. The inside of a prison was no unfamiliar place to him.

But not once has this put him off spreading the gospel. He says: “For this is my gospel, for which I am suffering to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained.” Talk about seeing the silver lining!

Paul’s outlook on his situation was that he might be locked up, but that doesn’t prevent him from still telling people about God, because *nothing* can stop him from doing that, literally not even chains around his wrists! He can still talk. God’s *word* can never be chained.

I’ve always felt that it is so much easier to follow someone’s advice if they set an example with their own lives. You know – when somebody gives you advice about something like losing weight, but they are overweight themselves, you are less likely to listen than to someone who is in really good shape!

The exact same thing is going on here – Timothy can take to heart what Paul tells him to do, because all through his life he has set an example. If Paul tells Timothy to not be put off by anything, to be strong in God’s grace, he can do that because he himself has never let anything stand in his way of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. He has been strong all his life. It can be done!

Paul is writing this letter near the end of his life. He knew he had to pass the torch to others to carry on what he had started. He knew that it wouldn’t be easy for Timothy, or anybody else, to fill his shoes, but he also knew that it could be done. Through the grace of God he himself was able to keep going, no matter what, and the same can be true for anyone else who tries.

No empty words there.

He never once said that it would be easy, but over and over he says that it *can* be done, and that actually, it is very rewarding.

And then he gives three examples from everyday life to illustrate what it means to be strong in Christ.

He says that no soldier gets involved in civilian affairs; he rather wants to please his commanding officer.

Soldiers train hard. They get taught to be tough, to focus on what is expected of them. Not to be distracted by anything. To be loyal. No true soldier will even consider straying from this path, because that could result in the loss of others' lives.

So if you've committed yourself to become a soldier, that's who you'll be, even when you have time off to spend with your family or go on holiday.

Exactly the same principle applies to an athlete. Serious athletes are focussed. They're 'in it to win it'! They train for long hours, make sure that they eat the right kind of food, and sleep for the right amount of hours. Once an athlete is in 'the zone', nothing can distract them.

But then, if you are a true athlete, you won't be able to ever be someone else, not even when you are not on the playing field, because it will have an influence on every aspect of your life.

Very often, if you stop practising for a while, you have to start all over again, and nobody who's put all their time and energy into training in the first place, will do that to themselves!

And then of course, there are the rules. An athlete needs to follow the rules if he/she wants to win. There's no way around it – if you cheat, you get disqualified.

Paul's last example is that of a farmer. We've got quite a few of them here, and they can tell you better than I that farming isn't for the fainthearted! Farming is hard work. It never stops. You can't plant the fields and then just ignore it! You have to always keep an eye on your crops, on the weather, and then act appropriately. If you plant the seeds and then go away on a long holiday, you might come home to no crop at all.

Cows or sheep lamb anytime of night or day, cows needs to be milked at the crack of dawn, no exception when you had a late night out. And this never changes. You need to work really hard, constantly, if you want to see the fruit of your labour!

People choose to be soldiers, athletes or farmers. Even though it's hard. But it's not only hard, it's also very rewarding.

Just the thought that *you* played a part in keeping your country and your loved ones safe; that gold medal; a good crop. Very rewarding.

Devoted soldiers, athletes and farmers all know that winning is not guaranteed. On the battlefield best friends get shot down; in a race a few

seconds can make all the difference between that gold medal and winning nothing at all; severe weather conditions could destroy a promising crop in the blink of an eye.

But no true soldier, athlete or farmer will be put off by things like these, they'll just keep going and work even harder.

Exactly the same thing should apply to us as Christians as well. We choose to believe in God. Not only because we know that there will be an amazing reward at the end, but because he chose us first.

And that in itself is very rewarding! The fact that we know we'll never be alone, that we'll be given the strength and courage we need to make the most of our lives, to stay standing in difficult circumstances, makes believing in God something that we just cannot live without!

But the fact that we believe in God doesn't mean that our lives will be plain sailing all the way. Life on earth is filled with hardship and misery, but that should never put us off or slow us down. As any soldier, athlete or farmer will be able to tell you – quitting only makes it worse.

The amazing thing about believing in Christ is that he did the most difficult bit *for us!*

How fabulous would it be if a soldier was told to take the day off, because someone else came to win the battle! Or if an athlete could not train for a week and still win the gold medal! Or if a farmer could forget to plant the seeds and the crop still comes up! But we all know it just doesn't work like that.

But that's what Jesus did for us on the cross – he did the most difficult part of being a Christian *for* us, so really, we can't complain.

All we need to do is keep our heads up, stand strong and keep going! And we don't even have to do this alone, because through his Spirit God is with us every step of the way.

So if you ever get disheartened along the way, just remember the journey Jesus made on your behalf to keep you motivated!

My wee boy Nehan is in primary 2 now. A couple of weeks ago their task was to write a letter to the friendly fairy-tale dragon. Nehan's teacher is really fantastic, and she motivates him so much, that for the first time in his life, he wrote one whole page. And when she looked at his work and saw that he described the dragon as "awesome, epic and magnificent", she praised him for using amazing descriptive words (although all these words were spelled wrong), and sent him to the depute head teacher to show her how well he'd done.

And that little motivation was all he needed to make him realize he could *do* it! So at the end of the week, when they had choosing time and he could play with anything he wanted in the class, all he wanted to do was write! Writing changed from being a chore to being something he enjoyed. And he can even spell "awesome, epic and magnificent" correctly now!

His wee attitude changed. And that changed *him*, really.

It's all about our attitude. We can see it as a chore to set an example to others, or we can actually enjoy doing it. We can complain when we are suffering and nothing comes easy for us, or we can see it as a challenge to just give more of ourselves.

We have *nothing* standing in our way – we live in a country where we are allowed to worship God freely and openly, so let's rip off those chains we put around our own wrists and go proclaim the word of God through everything we do and say. When it's easy *and* when it's difficult...

Let's stay focused and motivated, let's persevere and commit ourselves 100% to Christ. Because if we do that, everything else we have to handle will be a doddle!

Paul could say these things with his life hanging on the line, and his young apprentice Timothy would learn this same lesson soon enough.

Let's take this advice to heart this morning, so that one day when we are in a position to pass on advice to the next generation, they can look at our lives and think: "If *he* could do it / if *she* could do it, so can I!"

Instead of criticizing, let's motivate; instead of complaining, let's just get out there and get it done, and leave a legacy of faith that could one day maybe even change the world.

Amen