

A Good Soldier of Jesus Christ

2 Timothy 2:1-7

You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus;² and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.³ Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.⁴ No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs; the soldier's aim is to please the enlisting officer.⁵ And in the case of an athlete, no one is crowned without competing according to the rules.⁶ It is the farmer who does the work who ought to have the first share of the crops.⁷ Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in all things.

This fall we welcomed ten new students to the Presbyterian College, Montreal from across Canada, men and women preparing for ministry in Christ's church. One of our new students is a young man named Andrew who serves in the Canadian Armed Forces. He's been in the military for about ten years, and he's done tours of duty in a number of hot spots, including Bosnia and Afghanistan.

When he was in Afghanistan about six years ago he became Christian. Faced with life and death, suffering and war, on a daily basis, he came to a deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

A few years after that Andrew sensed a call to ministry, and he has a special burden for his fellow soldiers. So, he applied and was given permission by the military to study theology and prepare himself for military chaplaincy. That's why he's with us.

He's a great guy, deeply committed, full of life, and life experience, and he brings a unique perspective to his theological studies, and to our community of faith and learning. He brings a soldier's perspective. He brings a soldier's discipline. He brings a soldier's priorities.

That's the kind of perspective, the kind of discipline, and the kind of priorities that the Apostle Paul urges upon his young protégé Timothy. "Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs; the soldier's aim is to please the enlisting officer."

Why does Paul say this? Let's remember that Paul is writing to one of his most trusted associates. Paul had seen Timothy grow in faith and grow into ministry. This letter to Timothy was probably one of Paul's last, written from Rome, where he was in prison, awaiting death. Timothy was in Ephesus, where Paul had sent him to pastor the church there.

Paul himself had been in Ephesus for two years (Acts 19:10). The church in Ephesus had some problems, serious problems: moral problems, church fights, leadership issues, worship wars, spiritual disputes, and practical problems (not unlike the church today!). In chapter one Paul says that some had fallen away, some had turned away from their faith, and their call. Timothy, it seemed, was often fighting an uphill battle. And Paul wrote to Timothy to encourage and exhort him in the midst of the struggle.

That's why he begins in verse one by saying, "You then, or you therefore, in light of all this, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." He reminds Timothy that God's grace is the foundation of his life and ministry. By grace they had been saved. By grace they had been called. It was God's goodwill, God's unmerited favour, God's unconditional love, that sustained them. It was God's grace, and God's grace alone, revealed in Jesus Christ, that gave them the strength to carry on.

Paul uses three images of what it means to be strong in the grace of the Lord: an athlete (who competes according to the rules), a farmer (who works to share in the harvest), and a soldier (who serves as a soldier should). Let's look briefly at the lessons Paul draws from the image of the soldier to encourage Timothy.

First, Paul says that Timothy should expect to share in suffering like a good soldier of Jesus Christ. One of the translations puts it this way: “be prepared to endure hardship.”

A few years ago the psychiatrist Scott Peck began his well-known book *The Road Less Traveled* with these words: “Life is difficult.” He notes that many people assume that life should be smooth and manageable. We spend our time and our money and our energy on programs and strategies and techniques trying to make this happen. Peck argues that you only really begin to live when you embrace the reality that life indeed is difficult, rather than trying to evade it.

Well, I don’t know what you think about Scott Peck as a psychiatrist, but the Bible certainly reminds us that the Christian life is difficult; that Christian discipleship is difficult; that Christian ministry and Christian leadership are indeed difficult. That was certainly the experience of Paul and Timothy.

Paul reminds Timothy that a good soldier is prepared to share in the suffering entailed by the battle. This is a theme that Paul comes back to again and again.

In Philippians 3 he says he wants to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings by becoming like him in his death. We are united to a suffering Saviour, the Lord who died on a cross. A good soldier of Jesus Christ should expect to share in the suffering of Christ.

Martin Luther argued that "suffering" is a mark of the true church. Where the Word is truly preached, where the sacraments are rightly administered, where the gospel goes forth, there will be suffering. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way: "Discipleship means allegiance to a suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called to suffer."

Secondly, Paul says that "no one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs." A good soldier is single-minded. A good soldier, Paul says, has a clear focus. A soldier is someone who is released from other daily responsibilities in order to be wholly dedicated to the task.

Let me indicate that Paul's words here provide the biblical basis for our entire understanding of Christian ministry and leadership in the church. There is nothing magical or mystical about being a minister.

It simply comes down to this. God calls some men and women to be released from other daily responsibilities in order to be dedicated wholly to the work of the gospel. Not everyone can do this, but the church needs some to do this. It may be that there are young people, men and women, in this congregation, whom God is calling, or will call to full-time Christian ministry. That's part of what it means to be a good soldier.

But what about those who don't receive such a call? Well, we believe in the ministry of the whole people of God; the priesthood of all believers. Everyone has a call to serve the Lord. And for those of us who are indeed entangled in everyday affairs, as Paul puts it, we also have a call to be single-minded, to be clear in our focus, to be dedicated to the Lord, to be a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

What does it mean to be single-minded in the way we live daily: in our family relationships, in the way we handle our money, on the job, the way we spend our free time, with our friends, as we face illness, as we engage a world that is hurting?

Thirdly, and finally, as he rounds out the image of a soldier Paul says to Timothy: the soldier's aim is to please the enlisting officer.

Paul reminds Timothy that in the first instance Timothy is not there to please the church in Ephesus; he's not there to please to please Paul, as much as Paul might have wanted Timothy to do so. As a good soldier Timothy is to please the One who enlisted him, namely the Lord Jesus himself. Timothy was enlisted by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, to serve the Lord Jesus Christ, for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So many of us aim to please, but who are we trying to please? We tie ourselves up in knots trying to be people-pleasers. Paul reminds us to keep a proper focus: aim to please the One who brought you – the Lord Jesus.

There's a lot more that could be said about being a good soldier of Jesus Christ from this text: a good soldier, for example, trains others (v.2). But let's keep these three lessons in mind: Expect to share in suffering. Be single-minded. And aim to serve the One who enlisted you.

That's the shape of the Christian life, and that's the shape of Christian leadership today. Paul concludes this paragraph in verse 7 by saying: Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in all things."

During this season of the year we remember the example of good soldiers: those who have served in the past and those who serve now. Those who suffered, those who sacrificed, those who fought for peace and justice, and those fighting now, so that others might live.

The image of a good soldier, therefore, is not an idle and abstract metaphor. It is real. It was real in the time of Paul and Timothy. They knew what Roman soldiers looked like. And it's real in our time. And it reminds us that as good soldiers of Jesus Christ we must constantly be committed to the peace that comes through the reign of God in our lives, through the grace of God at work in our world. May the Lord give us understanding in all things. Amen.