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Faithful Character

2 Timothy 2 v 22-26

Introduction

Just 8 days until Christmas, and some of you will be planning trips to see family, or may be having family round to your place for Christmas dinner. I hope you have a lovely time. But it's also a dangerous time, isn't it? Christmas seems to be the best time for a family squabble. It might be about politics. It might be about a family issue. It might even seem like Uncle Jo's lost his senses as he tries to argue that man never went to the moon, or Elvis didn't really die in 77.

Paul knows there are similar squabbles happening in the church at Ephesus, and he wants to help Timothy deal with them in the best way possible.

Recap

The first word in our passage is "so", and we can't just skip over that. The word "so" is connecting all that has gone one in the chapter so far, with what Paul is about to tell us, so let's recap from the start of chapter 2…

- A good soldier - endures hardship and fights for he who enlisted him
- A good athlete - follows the rules and trains hard to win the prize
- A good farmer - works hard to bring in the crop, and is first to taste of it
- A good prisoner - like Paul, realises that he is imprisoned for the sake of the elect
- A good worker - studies to show himself approved before God
- A good vessel - is cleansed so it can be used for honourable things

Notice the common thread in all these examples Paul uses. In every one there is self-sacrifice for a greater good. Enduring hardship, being disciplined, working hard, suffering unjustly, studying deeply, cleaning out - these are all things that take effort and can be painful. But they're done for a higher goal. Defending a country, winning a prize, feeding a village, spreading the gospel, building up the saints, glorifying God. These are the goals. And when the rewards are so high, it makes the sacrifice worthwhile.

Think of the old testament sacrifices. The Israelites were called to bring their very best before the Lord, and present it to him. This was no small thing, it was costly. And yet they brought these offerings to the Lord because they knew what they would receive was much greater. Forgiveness for sin. The guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit. A God who fought their battles for them. A blessing on their nation. And so Paul calls Timothy to give much to the Lord, to give his best even, for the greater blessing: for him, for the church at Ephesus and for the greater good of God's kingdom through the ages.

So

So. We get to that word at the start of our passage. Paul has shown us what God wants us to be, now here's the path. Here is Paul's training regime to make us fit to serve God through hardship and testing. He wants to build character.

I don't know if you've ever taken a holiday in Scotland. We live in a beautiful country and it can be the loveliest place to visit. But it's a risk! Depending on the vagaries of the weather you can get glorious sunshine, pouring rain or hailstones. Or all three on the same day. I remember family holidays down the Clyde coast at Girvan. I remember putting on the grass by the beach. I remember chugging along in the motor boats. And I remember climbing Byne Hill in the pouring rain. When we got to the top we could hardly see anything. But we were always told it was character building.

You see building character is hard work. It can be painful. And it takes time. How did Paul want Timothy to build a faithful character?

Flee Youthful Passions

So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. [2 Timothy 2 v 22]

What are youthful passions? The things that occupy our hearts and minds, especially when we are young. Money. Fame. Adventure. Relationships. Other translations call them youthful lusts, or evil desires of youth. They are the things that take your mind off God when you're in the church service. Or they're the things that prevent you coming to church at all. They're the things that the world will tell you are necessary for a fulfilled life. But Paul says they are dangers against building a faithful character. However we can't just flee these things in our lives and not replace them with anything. Instead Paul says to pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace. Seek out opportunities to do good, to befriend, to encourage and to share.

I have two things to add to this. Firstly this isn't just written to young people. Youthful passions might be most evident when we're young and full of energy, but they can also eat away at our spiritual life when we're older. We need to be vigilant.

And secondly, we're not going through this alone. Paul says to pursue all these good things along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Isn't that great? There's a lot of work involved but we can walk with each other on this path, and we can seek to bring brothers and sisters back onto the path when they stray.

Now, there is some disagreement about what Paul meant by youthful passions. What I've just talked about is what some commentators agree with. However some others say that Timothy has already shown himself to be faithful in avoiding these sorts of sinful lusts, so Paul must be warning about a sort of higher minded youthful passion. Calvin suggests that young people are more prone to hotly argue a point, being confident in themselves and jumping in with both feet. And that does chime well with the next verse.

Avoid Foolish Controversies

Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. [2 Timothy 2 v 23]

Some of us just love a good argument. We can take the smallest thing and argue one side against another, and we're great at putting together a case for our side, whether it's the best political position or the best way to make a cup of tea. It can get really serious when we take a firm stance on a religious issue, like the correct interpretation of a word or passage in the Bible. And what's the point of an argument? To win, of course. And in winning we create division. How much better if we both work together to seek truth.

Think about that previous verse. There were different ideas about the phrase "youthful passions". We could start debating about which interpretation was right. You could take one side and I could take the other and we could each argue our case. Do you know what would happen? The more each of us tried to defend our position, the more entrenched we would become and the less likely to admit that the other side had a point. We would end up divided on opinion and possibly hurt by each others' verbal attacks. How much better if we worked together to study what the word says, and find out what we could learn from the passage in either case. After all, if some of the great Bible scholars of the past didn't agree on the precise definition, who are we to claim we know for sure?

Do Not Quarrel

Of course sometimes we do know for sure, and someone comes up with something that is just plain wrong. This seems to be what Timothy has encountered, as Paul mentions Hymenaeus and Philetus in verse 17. They have swerved from the truth, and are saying that the resurrection has already happened, and it's causing problems: they are upsetting the faith of some brothers and sisters. This situation needs addressing, and Pauls' suggestion of how it is addressed is surprising:

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. [2 Timothy 2 v 24-25]

What's happening here? We'd expect Paul to want Timothy to stamp down hard on such dangerous nonsense. And maybe it would eventually come to that, but what he suggests first is that kindness is better than quarrelling. Timothy is to teach and correct, but to do it with kindness, patience and gentleness. How much harder is that than forcefully arguing your point?

How would you even go about it? The first clue is in how Paul refers to "patiently enduring the evil". Hear them out. Listen to what they're saying carefully, even if you know it's wrong. Ask them how they came to this opinion. Find out what scriptures or thought processes led them to this belief. And only once they've fully explained themselves, take them through their error step by step.

This takes skill. It takes knowledge. It requires a solid foundation in the word of God. But that's what Paul has been urging Timothy from the start of the chapter. Be disciplined, train hard, work hard, study to show yourself approved, and train up others so that they too will be able to gently correct and keep their brothers and sisters from swerving from the truth. Look at verse 1 again:

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. [2 Timothy 2 v 1]

And by the way, don't assume you have to know all the answers. All of us are learning, and I'm sure some of these faithful men would have turned to Timothy for help sometimes. Who did Timothy turn to? God, of course.

What's the outcome of all this? Well if we quarrel, if we argue our side determined to win, we will either win or lose the argument. Whatever the outcome there will be division. If we can get alongside someone and carefully take them through the scriptures, at worst we will have shown them that we care about them and their spiritual wellbeing.

At best?

And Maybe

God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. [2 Timothy 2 v 25-26]

Have you ever had a friend who got very ill, and then recovered? How did you feel? Very thankful and happy for them, I'd imagine. You'd probably prayed for them while they were ill. You probably prayed for a full recovery. And it's the same for those who have swerved from the truth, who have taken up some wrong position. Our aim shouldn't be to shut them down and put them out, but to restore them with kindness and love. As well as gently teaching them, we should be praying for them, as they could well be caught in a snare. You don't see a snare when you approach it. It just suddenly grabs you and holds you, not letting go. Very often the only way out of a snare is with the help of someone else.

Do you remember somewhere else in the Bible where it says someone came to their senses? The prodigal son! He had made bad choices, taking his inheritance early, throwing it away on wild living, and ended up in the lowest of jobs feeding the pigs. And it was when he found himself longing to eat the pigs' food that he came to his senses. He repented of his ways and came back to his father, looking to be a servant in his father's household. And the father ran to him, embraced him, put his robe and ring on him and laid on a feast to celebrate his return.

You see the truth is important but people are also important. And when we see those who have made poor decisions return to the flock we should rejoice and celebrate.

Summary

So I hope you do have a pleasant time at Christmas. I hope you are able to spend time with loved ones and have good conversations. And when controversies arise let's not be quarrelsome, but kind. And even more so in the church, let's encourage each other and build each other up. Talk about the Bible, discuss what it says. As Paul says in verse 1, let us *be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus*, and learn together.