

January 5, 2025

THE TASK, ITS CHALLENGES, AND WHY WE SHOULD BE HOPEFUL

2 Timothy 2:1-13

*(3 of 8 in a series through 2 Timothy)*

Each new year provides an opportunity for us to reflect on how we have been doing and refocus on what we should be doing. It may be that you've looked back on this last year and thought you've cared too little for your health and need to start eating better and exercising more. I know that's true for me. And I know that we're supposed to mock the idea of new year's resolutions, it seems, since so many of us will abandon them—maybe as early as a few days or weeks from now. But I actually think it's a good thing. If the day comes that we stop reflecting on how we're living and examining ways we could improve, well, it's a sign that we've settled into just drifting along, and nothing good comes from drifting through life. We've noted many times, you don't just drift toward godly living. It requires periodic reflection and examination as well as intentional planning and effort.

The same is obviously true for a local church. May of this year will mark our church's thirtieth year of being in existence, and October will be the twenty-five year anniversary of the day we reconstituted our membership as a little over sixty of us signed the church covenant together. Over those years, the Lord has enabled us to train, equip, send out, and support a number of men to pastor churches, been a part of planting four churches (with one coming in Haywood County soon, Lord-willing), sent out multiple others to minister in different areas, and been able to aid one another in obeying Christ's commands. The Lord's grace over the thirty-years that CCC has existed has been remarkable, and we must not take it for granted for one second. Using Paul's language, we are what we are by the grace of God.

And I'd love for us to be around another thirty years and thirty years after that and thirty years after that, walking as a faithful, healthy local church. But in order to do that, we must periodically and intentionally stop and remind ourselves of our mission, making sure we're aiming at those things that Christ has commanded us. And looking at our text this morning gives us an opportunity to do just that as 2 Timothy 2:1-13 is a section of this letter Paul writes to Timothy where he focuses Timothy on the task at hand.

It actually makes good sense in my mind in the flow of the letter. Paul writes this final letter from a prison cell, awaiting his execution. Therefore, he begins by expressing his confidence in everything he's preached throughout his life. Then, he moves on to encouraging Timothy, challenging him not to give himself over to timidity and cowardice but to labor faithfully, willingly facing persecution if that is what is necessary in being unashamed of the gospel in his culture. But after expressing confidence and encouraging Timothy, it makes sense to say to Timothy, "And in your courage and the power of the Spirit, here is what you need to be doing." And that's what Paul does in 2:1-13.

And, as I've mentioned, this is helpful for us because just as Paul focuses Timothy on the mission at hand, looking at these verses provides us an opportunity to focus ourselves as well on our mission. Therefore, as we work through the text, I want to note the main thing we do as a church, and then I want to note how we do it, why we can be hopeful in doing that, and what the end result will be. So, first, what is our mission? We must make disciples, passing on what we have received.

### **We must make disciples, passing on what we have received**

Paul begins our text, noting that Timothy will need divine strength to carry out the task before him, saying, "You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (v. 1). Then, he gives Timothy orders concerning what he must be about, adding, "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" (v. 2).

Many have noted, and you can see it here, that this represents four generations in the faith. Paul passed on what he received from Jesus to Timothy, who is to pass on to faithful men, who are to pass on to others as well. Paul envisions Timothy taking the gospel and all that Paul had passed on to him and passing it on to others so that they might do the same. That's disciple-making. Paul, in essence, is telling Timothy, keep making disciples of Christ.

And we should note that this is the same thing that Jesus charged every local church with when he said in Matthew 28:18-20, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In other words, the command that Paul gives Timothy here is, in essence, a repetition of the command that Jesus gave to every local church. With the Great Commission, Jesus is telling us to pass on what he's given to us (by his own mouth and through his apostles) to others who will do the same. As a church, our mission is to take the gospel that has been passed on to us through generations of believers and proclaim it to unbelievers so that they might hear and believe. Then, as they believe, we're to baptize them, allowing them to profess their faith publicly and bring them into a local church. Then, as part of a local church where they have oversight, accountability, and all the encouragement that comes with being part of a church, we are to teach one another how to obey all that Jesus has commanded us to believe and do. In other words, we're to pass on to one another all that has been passed on to us.

And I want to note two things here. First, this must remain the mission of our church, and we must filter every decision we make through this filter of what our mission is, or we will not remain a faithful local church. And our first instinct might be to say, "Of course, that's easy." But it's easy for a church to lose its way by focusing on many good things that aren't this. And even in my small circles, I've watched churches close their doors because they allowed their main focus and everything they did to be filtered through something other than the mission of making

disciples of Jesus Christ—passing on to others what had been passed on to them. This is why before making any decision, or recommendation to the church, or spending any dollar the church has, as pastors we’re asking, “How does this *directly* help us fulfill the Great Commission?”

Second, Paul’s exhortation to Timothy here is why the Bible must remain central week-by-week as we gather together. Again, I know you’ve heard me say that a million times but let me show you yet another reason why this is crucial. Perhaps as kids you played the game “telephone.” If you haven’t, it’s where you get several individuals together and you whisper something to the individual to your right, and they do the same, until the message works all the way back around to the person to your left, and then that person says the message out loud. In other words, it’s a game where you take what you’ve heard and entrust it to the person next to you so that they might teach others the same thing (to get as close to Paul’s language as we can while talking about this game!). But, if you’ve played, you know what inevitably happens. Perhaps it’s because kids mumble or laugh while whispering or don’t hear that well or intentionally sabotage the message—I honestly don’t know—the message always gets distorted by the time the last person hears it and proclaims it out loud.

This same thing has taken place in numerous churches. What has been passed on to them has been distorted and abandoned so that the message they’re proclaiming each Sunday is utterly different than what Paul passed on to Timothy. The truth was entrusted to people who were unfaithful. But how do we avoid that? Well, one way to put a guardrail against that is to make the reading and exposition of the Scripture central to what we do. We always want to evaluate what we’re saying and doing in light of the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints and given to us as Holy Scripture.

And so the opening verses of this section remind us of our mission. We must make disciples, passing on what we have received to others who may do the same. We do that in our preaching, teaching of Sunday school classes, in helping one another think through how to practically apply the Scripture in our small group meetings, in raising our children, and in exhorting, reminding, and helping one another to live God-honoring lives as we walk through this life together. But Paul adds more, in order to fulfill the mission of the church we must be singled-minded, willing to suffer, and willing to work hard.

### **We must be single-minded, willing to suffer, and willing to work hard**

After reminding Timothy of his central task of making disciples who will continue to make disciples, Paul exhorts Timothy once more to be willing to suffer for the sake of this task. He writes in verse 3, “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ.” But it’s with that mention of a soldier that Paul launches into three images of how Timothy must think about what he’s doing.

First, he mentions a soldier, writing, “No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him” (v. 4). This makes sense, no soldier who is worth his salt is going to be on a battlefield trying to run a lemonade stand on the side. He’s going to be focused

on the task at hand. What Paul is saying, then, is that Timothy, likewise, must be single-minded. He must be about the task of passing on to faithful men what Paul has passed on to him.

Let's then note that for ourselves as well. I won't spend much time elaborating here since I've already noted it, but we've been given a commission by our Lord Jesus Christ to make disciples, baptize them, and teach them (in the context of a local church) to obey all that Christ commands. That's what we do. It's why we train men who'll plant churches and serve as pastors in churches. It's why we gather and read, preach, sing, pray, and delight in God's Word. It's why we do everything we do, and it must always be what we do. We must be single-minded and focus on that as a church.

Second, Paul brings in the picture of an athlete. He writes, "An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules" (v. 5). Again, the picture makes sense to us. If a man is running a race, for example, but he gets off the path and takes a short-cut, he'll be disqualified. He didn't compete according to the rules, and unless he does so, he'll not be crowned the winner of the event.

But clearly Paul isn't bringing this up just to inform Timothy of how athletic events work. He's using it to make a point, as he did with the soldier, reminding Timothy to be single-minded in his task. But what does it mean, then, for Timothy to compete according to the rules? We could probably say much here, but holding close to the context, Paul probably has in mind Timothy's willingness to obey Jesus even if it means he suffers. In other rules, the terms or "rules" of following Jesus means that we pass on his Word and obey it, not turning aside, even if we suffer.

And, finally, Paul mentions the farmer, writing, "It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops" (v. 6). This one is straightforward enough. We must work hard, making sure that we as a church are obeying the Great Commission.

After all of these pictures, Paul tells Timothy in verse 7 to think over what he's saying. Timothy needs to realize that he must be single-minded, willing to obey to the point of suffering, and work hard to make sure that he's making disciples. And so I want to say this to us as well. Jesus doesn't tell us to obey his commands only if we're in some kind of utopian society. He knows we'll have mockery, opposition, and persecution. He knows his message isn't popular and that the gospel is foolish to those who are perishing. He also knows that ministry requires our resources, which demand sacrifices from us. But Jesus doesn't hide these terms or smuggle them into a long email we'll ignore. He tells us that if they persecuted him, they'll persecute us. He tells us that he came to divide families over allegiance to him. Therefore, amidst all the pressures we'll always feel, we must make sure we're single-minded, willing to suffer, and willing to work hard to ensure that we're a church that is about the mission Jesus gave us.

But it's not all reminders about how much it'll cost us. Paul also gives a word of great encouragement. We can be confident in our mission because of Jesus' reign, God's Word, and God's electing grace.

## **We can be confident in this task because of Jesus' reign, God's Word, and electing grace**

Okay, so we've said so far that we're to make disciples until the end of this age, even if it means being single-minded, working hard, and suffering. But what hope do we have that we'll be successful when it seems like so much in this world is stacked against us? What can encourage us to press on against all this opposition? Well, we have three realities we can hold to. First, remember that Jesus reigns.

Paul writes in verse 8, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel." When Paul mentions that Jesus is the offspring of David, that's Paul's way of reminding Timothy that Jesus is the Messiah—God's promised king who reigns over his kingdom forever. And this Jesus overcame death, by rising and living forever, even as Paul preaches. And so the context in which we're carrying out obedience to Jesus' commission is in a world over which Jesus reigns as God's eternal king. Nothing comes to us outside of his reign. We're obeying the one who has all power as God's king. Remember Matthew 28:18. Isn't that encouraging? But that's not all. Paul adds in verse 9, "For which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!"

When Paul set out to obey the commission Jesus had given him, taking the gospel to the Gentiles, it brought about much that would hinder Paul. He was beaten, shipwrecked, stoned, imprisoned, and would be eventually executed. And so you might look at Paul, bound in prison, and think, "Well, the work is hopeless now." But Paul's answer is to say, "Not so fast." You see, they may bind Paul, but nothing can stop the Word of God moving through this world. And so in those moments where we feel little traction or reason for encouragement, remember God's Word will not fail. We can be hopeful because even if they kill us, God's Word will keep spreading.

One of my favorite stories comes from the life of William Carey. His biographer, Timothy George, tells of how Carey translated and dispersed copies of Bibles all over the place. Seventeen years after the printing and dispersion of his Bengali New Testament, Christian missionaries made their way to the city of Dacca. When they arrived, they found that the people there had put away their idols and were praying for God to send someone to teach them more about Jesus. And when the missionaries asked why, these villagers went and grabbed a frayed copy of a book that they'd kept in a box for years. It was Carey's Bengali New Testament.<sup>1</sup> God's Word will not be bound. His message will spread. So be encouraged to keep obeying.

Finally, Paul writes, "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (v. 10). Here's what Paul is saying. He knows that God has chosen a people for himself from every tongue, tribe, and nation. Now, why bring up election here? Well, the reason is because for the biblical authors, election wasn't

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope, 1991), 139.

a doctrine that caused debate but a doctrine meant to encourage us, humble us, and motivate us to obedience.

We see it encourages us in Romans 8. If God has elected us before the foundation of the world, who could condemn us? We see it humbles us in 1 Corinthians 1. Consider your calling, brothers. Not many of us were wise, noble, or powerful, but God chose the weak and foolish things of the world—us—in order to demonstrate his grace and wisdom. And it motivates us to obedience. That’s why Paul brings it up here.

If God has chosen before the foundation of the world a people for himself from every tongue, tribe, and nation, then we can’t fail in our mission. Give as many reasons as you want for being pessimistic about the church’s mission, and I’ll respond by pointing to a scene in Revelation 7 where a redeemed people from every tribe of this earth praising our Lord. Christ will have the prize for which he died—and inheritance of nations—and so we should be encouraged to press on against all odds.

Now, our response could be that this is encouraging, and getting motivated for a season is feasible, but how do we endure in this task? And that’s answered in our final verses. We endure by remembering the faithful of our Lord.

### **We endure by remembering the faithfulness of our Lord**

As Paul wraps up this section, he reminds Timothy of a glorious truth that may well have been a hymn that was circulated around the churches in the first century. He writes, “The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself” (vv. 11-13).

We endure in obedience to the task Jesus has given us because we know that everything Jesus has promised is true. He has promised if we repent and believe in him, then we will be united with him so that we can say not only that he died for us but also that we died with him. And if we died with him, then we will live with him forever. He’s also promised that if we endure in repentance and faith, then we’ll reign with him on that day when he returns. And his word of judgment is true as well. He’s told us that if we deny him before men, then he’ll deny us before the Father. This again is a reminder why we should endure. But then this final line goes a way you might not expect. You might expect him to say, “If we are faithless, he will cast us aside” or the like. But he doesn’t. If we are faithless, he remains faithful.

Now, this doesn’t mean that if refuse to believe that Jesus is who he says he is and settle in unbelief, we will still be saved. That’s not what he’s saying. When Paul says, “If we are faithless,” he’s referencing times when we struggle with sin. In other words, if we sin and turn to the Lord, we don’t have to fear that his response will be, “I no longer want anything to do with you. You were faithless in that moment.” No, he will be faithful to himself, and he has promised that he will not leave us or forsake us. Therefore, we can keep enduring in obedience to the mission

Jesus has given us because we can always count on the faithfulness of our Lord. What he has said he will do.

As we start a new year, it's good for us to focus ourselves afresh. The Lord has given us a mission to make disciples through the local church. Let's make sure this is always our mission. Let's be single-minded, willing to work hard, and willing to suffer in order to be faithful as a church. And as we labor, remember why we can be confident. Jesus reigns, his Word is not bound, and his electing grace will ensure he'll have a people from all over the earth. And therefore endure, knowing that the one who has promised all of these things is faithful. Therefore, let's proclaim our trust in him now as we come to the table. Amen.