

Faithfulness

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2 Timothy 2:1-13

Sermon Series:
Kingdom Legacy

*...be strong in
the grace that
is in Christ
Jesus.*

Some time ago, a good friend of mine found herself continually answering the question “How are you doing?” by responding, “Busy.” She noticed many others responded the same. Everyone was busy, busy, busy. So she resolved to stop—to stop answering the question that way and to stop talking about how busy she was, because she didn’t want to define her identity or her life by the word “busy.”

Busyness has become America’s new status symbol. It can be intoxicating. James Houston writes, “Busyness can also be an addictive drug, which is why its victims are increasingly referred to as ‘workaholics.’ Busyness acts to repress our inner fears and personal anxieties, as we scramble to achieve an enviable image to display to others. We become ‘outward’ people, obsessed with how we appear, rather than ‘inward’ people, reflecting on the meaning of our lives.”

I have seen the drive for busyness in many people and many places, but I have to tell you, after living here for over a year now, the DC area takes the cake. This place is more intense than anywhere I have ever been. People’s lives are overloaded, and the drive to accomplish more and more seems even more pervasive.

But in the kingdom of God, there is a distinction between being busy and being faithful. Five years ago, before we adopted our first son, Nate, I was a busy pastor. My life was about to become even busier, and I wondered how I was going to manage the pastor/mother reality. The Lord gave me a gift by helping me realize that being busy and productive is not necessarily the same as being faithful. My responsibility as a child of God and a servant of Christ is to live faithfully. That is one of the core practices you will see in the circle on the back of your bulletin. It is God’s responsibility, by His grace and power, to make us fruitful. To be honest, I still struggle with this. We all do, and we all will because of our compulsive human nature and the culture we live in. But in today’s passage from 2nd Timothy, Paul is going to make clear the way of way of faithfulness in the kingdom of God as he gives three charges to Timothy.

The first charge is to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Strength is a quality that is highly admired in our culture. But Paul exhorts Timothy to rely on God’s grace, not his own human striving or even his success. If anyone had reason to rely on his human capacity or success, it was Paul. He was highly educated, smart and strong. He accomplished amazing feats for

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the kingdom of God. But he also suffered. He was in prison, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, persecuted by many, often hungry, cold and naked (2 Corinthians 11:22-29). You have to wonder: What made Paul able to strive relentlessly for the gospel and endure so much hardship, and to remain faithful to the Lord in the face of the challenges, risks, adventures and even difficulties of life and ministry?

He lived what he preached and what he taught his young disciple Timothy. He relied on the grace that was in Christ Jesus. He believed Christ's words to him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I have said before that grace is God acting in your life to accomplish for you what you cannot accomplish on your own.

Paul was a man who was completely transformed by the grace of God, and that transformation resulted in remarkable faithfulness in his character, his life, his relationships and his ministry. The presence and the power of the Holy Spirit truly reformed and reshaped him so that he became like Jesus and did the things Jesus did and said the things Jesus said.

As he nears the end of his life and ministry and thinks about leaving a kingdom legacy, one of the main charges he gives to his disciple Timothy is to "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Paul understands experientially the challenges and stresses of life and ministry and that the resources needed to face them are not found in our own human nature but in

Christ's grace. It is not only for salvation that we are dependent on grace but for life and service also.

I don't know what circumstances you find yourselves in right now. Some of you are facing health challenges, some of you are in stressful jobs or financial circumstances. Others have stress in their families because they have had a baby or are sending a child off to college or face any number of other transitions or crises. This is the stuff life is made up of. The message our culture often tells us is that we should buck up, pull up our bootstraps and gut it out.

But God wants us to rely on His grace, and sometimes that grace comes to us through the loving support of family, friends, members of a small group, or even a Stephen Minister. We are indoctrinated to be self-reliant and self-sufficient, but God wants us to rely on His grace and accept the gifts that He extends to us through others. As a pastor, I often get frustrated when people resist or even refuse the gracious gift of a Stephen Minister or deacon meals or any number of caring ministries of this church. But I confess I do the same thing. Some people have recently offered to help me out, to do something for me, and I'm having a hard time saying "yes." I think I should be able to handle it on my own like others seem to be doing. There is something in me, in all of us, that wants to handle life or ministry on our own. We are finite and often frail human beings that were created and redeemed to rely on God's infinite and supernatural resources, and many times those resources come to us through hands

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and feet and hearts of others. Like Paul and Timothy, we need to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

The next charge Paul gives to Timothy is to entrust (what you have heard) to faithful people who will be able to teach others. Again, Paul is a wonderful example of someone who did this. He received the good deposit of the gospel from Christ and was nurtured by Barnabas, and he was faithful in passing on what he had learned to others.

His ministry took him all over the known world, and he preached to and shared the gospel with thousands of people and planted many churches. But he followed Jesus' method and example of making disciples by investing in a few. While he had his sights on the multitudes, he knew that solid transmission of the faith would not occur simply by speaking to more and more crowds. It would take working with individuals in the context of community for that to happen. We know Paul lived out this admonition because his letters are filled with the names of those to whom he gave himself, such as Timothy, Titus, Silas, Luke, Euodia, Syntyche, Epaphroditus, Priscilla and Aquila. They accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys, were entrusted with ministry responsibility and became co-laborers in the gospel.

Now listen to me carefully: There is an enormous pressure to do more and more ourselves to be able to point to our accomplishments. But what really matters,

and what will last past our lifetimes, is the quality of the relationships that we nurture.

This really struck home this past week with the death of Tim Russert. The man was an amazing journalist, but those who knew him, including his work colleagues, appreciated most the quality of his character and his relationships with God, his father, Big Russ, his son, Luke, and wife, Maureen. And they appreciated being called his friend. In the face of death, you know what matters most in leaving a legacy is relationships. In remembering Tim Russert and his many involvements with kids in DC, someone said, "The best exercise is to reach down and lift another up."

That's a kingdom principle. And to leave a kingdom legacy means taking the gospel we have received and passing it on to faithful people who, in turn, will pass it on to yet another generation of reliable people.

We all need what is popularly called 360 relationships. While we all want and even need relationships with people who share our experience or stage of life, I think we can get stuck if we have only those kinds of relationships. We all need a Paul in our lives—someone who is further along on the journey—to continue to help us be conformed to the image of Christ and to be further equipped in carrying out God's will in our lives and ministry. I need that kind of relationship in my life, too. We also need to entrust what we have learned and received to others. For those of us who are parents, our children are certainly a top priority,

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but I think most of us could identify at least one or even two other people we could include. Even if your spiritual gift is not shepherding, or teaching, or leading, all of us are further along in the faith journey than someone else we know—a neighbor, work colleague, friend, or people in your small group. Whom is God calling you to pour your life into in order to help that person or people grow in Christ and be further equipped to live out God’s will in their lives?

Some may do this through mentoring others while doing a service project together or sharing a common interest. Others, by leading a small group or teaching a Sunday School class and building relationships with those people. Passing on to others what we have learned can take so many different forms, but what is needed is intentionality. The truth is that all of us are being led by something or someone, and we are leading others. The problem is that we are often not intentional about this, and so the process is often not as effective as it could be.

When I was a teenager, I ran track and I was a part of various relays. Anyone who has run a relay knows that the most critical moment of those races is the passing of the baton. You can lose a lot of time and lose the race through an ineffective pass. Or worse yet, be disqualified by dropping the baton. The gospel of Jesus Christ has been passed to each one of us, and we are in a race. But it’s not just about coming to the end of our individual races and receiving a

reward for a race well run. It is also a matter of whether we are faithful to pass the gospel on to others who, in turn, will be ready and equipped to pass the baton on to others. The kingdom baton is meant to be passed.

The final charge Paul gives to Timothy is to share in suffering or endure hardship with him, and he provides three very apt illustrations of the kind of endurance and discipline that are necessary. The first image relates to the military. We are to endure hardship as good soldiers. Paul spent a lot of time in prison, so he had a lot of opportunity to watch Roman soldiers and to meditate on the parallels between the soldier and the Christian. The image here is not about warfare so much as disciplined obedience. Now those are two words that many don’t like, but discipline and obedience are essential for faithfulness as a soldier and a follower of Christ. We, too, are called to dedication and a willingness both to suffer and to concentrate. Soldiers on active service do not expect a safe or easy time. They take hardship, risk and suffering as a matter of course. And they are not to become entangled in civilian affairs. We, too, must be careful not to become distracted from our commission to make disciples of all nations but must see every relationship and every activity and every responsibility that we engage in in our ordinary lives as an opportunity to serve and glorify Christ and to bear witness to him by our words and deeds.

The second image Paul uses is in the realm of athletics. Athletic con-

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tests were popular and highly valued in the Greco-Roman tradition, much as they are in our own day. And while winning was highly prized, keeping to the rules was expected. Every sport had its rules, and no athlete, however brilliant, was crowned with the triumphal wreath unless he had competed according to the rules. “No rules, no wreath” was the order of the day.

This metaphor is so relevant to us today, especially with the Olympics almost upon us. Winning and being on top have become so important in our culture, not to mention financially lucrative. Some people will do anything to achieve their goals or desires, including taking drugs to enhance performance. I once heard a piece on the radio about a survey that was taken with world class athletes, who were asked if they would take drugs if they could be assured of winning and not getting caught. It was astounding the percentage that said they would, and even many of those said they would take drugs even if it led to early death—even five or ten years later.

But it’s not just the sports world; the news these days is filled with inside trading scandals in business and bribery in government. Paul makes clear that as followers of Christ, we are called to live our lives in a manner that is worthy of our calling. In God’s eyes, you can’t win if you don’t follow the rules. Faithfulness is not just about what we accomplish but the way we accomplish it. We are

to compete according to the rules, remaining faithful in our moral conduct as well as our Christian service.

And the final image is of farming. If the soldier is to be undistracted and dedicated to service, and the athlete is to play fair, the farmer must work hard. Hard work is indeed indispensable to good farming, and, of course, that was especially true in Paul’s day, when machinery was not available and farming depended as much on sweat as on skill. We are like hardworking farmers who must apply discipline, diligence and determination to our lives and ministry before a harvest can be enjoyed. Again, a farmer doesn’t merely go out and scatter seed and leave the rest to chance. It is only after a season of intentional cultivating, planting, fertilizing, watering, weeding and growing that the harvest will be realized.

Paul has used a kaleidoscope of images to communicate that the Christian life and ministry are not easy or painless. He reminds Timothy and us that we are to remain faithful as servants of Christ, and we can only do that if we are strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus rather than relying on ourselves and human sufficiency. We are to entrust the gospel to faithful people rather than living individualistically or independently. And we are to endure hardship like the soldier, athlete and farmer rather than seek a life of security, comfort, or ease.

Paul knows what it means to endure hardship because, as he writes this letter to Timothy, he is

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wearing chains like a common criminal. But while he is chained, he knows that God's word is not. Paul was not a success in the world's eyes. But in God's eyes, he was faithful—faithful to Christ and to the ministry God had entrusted to him. He was strong in the grace of Christ, he entrusted what he received to a faithful few, and he endured hardship. He calls Timothy to follow this same pattern of faithfulness.

In verses 9 and 10, Paul gives his reasons for enduring hardship. He says, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David." Jesus Christ is always at the forefront of Paul's mind, always on the tip of his tongue. Paul is so convinced about the person of Jesus Christ. Now understand, Paul was a busy man, but his life was not defined by his busyness, his success, or even his hardship. His life was defined by his passion for Christ and for the gospel. He was so overwhelmed by God's grace and faithfulness to him that he was willing to say in verse 10, "I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory." God's faithfulness to him captured him, and he wanted to be faithful to God in living for the kingdom and leaving a kingdom legacy. Paul is an inspiration and a wonderful model with a powerful message about how to live faithfully. These charges are not only for Timothy but for us as well. By God's grace and power, may we too live faithfully.

