

A Christ-Centered Leader is Built to Last

2 Timothy 2:1-13

Introduction

Hey everyone and welcome to episode fourteen of the Group Leader Podcast.

Today's episode is called "A Christ-Centered Leader is Built to Last," drawing from 2 Timothy 2:1-13.

So far in our series called *The Making of a Christ-Centered Leader*, which is a study of the book of 2 Timothy, we've looked at how leaders are chosen in Christ, how they're formed by family, and how they can be courageous in Christ.

Today we come to Paul's advice to Timothy for being a leader that's built to last. A leader who doesn't shrink back; a leader who doesn't fall short; a leader who doesn't run out of steam.

Starting well is difficult, but lots of people do that. It's finishing well that's much more difficult.

Paul, who remember is at the end of his life, knows what it's like to go the distance for Christ and his church. He knows what it's like to suffer for the sake of the gospel without giving up or giving in.

So what wisdom does he have for Timothy? What wisdom does he have for us?

Paul passes down his wisdom here in the form of four challenges. Paul challenges Timothy, and by extension us, to...

1. Live in the gospel
2. Pass on the gospel
3. Endure for the gospel
4. Remember the hero of the gospel¹

Let me walk you through each one of those, starting with challenge number 1: to live in the gospel.

¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, p. 158

Challenge #1: Live in the gospel

Paul's first challenge to Timothy comes in the first verse of chapter two, where Paul writes,

“You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”

(2 Timothy 2:1 ESV)

Those words “be strengthened” are what indicate this is a challenge from Paul to Timothy. Paul is challenging him not to grow weary or weak as he endures for the sake of the gospel and the church.

Remember, the church at this time was experiencing heavy persecution, and Timothy was being asked to take over the church in Ephesus, which was being influenced by false teachers. So the church was experiencing pressure from inside and outside the church.

Put yourself in Timothy's shoes. Your mentor, who happens to be the Apostle Paul, is in prison and about to be executed for the sake of the gospel. You're about thirty years old, which was when you would begin ministry in those days. You're being asked to guard the true gospel, to reason against false teachers, and to teach the people of the church in patience and wisdom, even when they don't want to hear from you.

A couple of weeks of that and most of us would want to quit. Just walk away and let someone else deal with it.

Paul knew Timothy would face this temptation, so he told him to draw strength from the only lasting source—the grace of Jesus.

This was Paul's way of challenging Timothy to live in the gospel—to swim in it, bathe in it, revel in it.

To remind himself of the good news that even though Timothy was dead in his sin, God loved him enough to send his Son to die for Timothy's sake, then to chase Timothy down through the Apostle Paul and save him from eternal death.

Timothy was once a slave to darkness, but now he was a free man in Christ.

When's the last time you reminded yourself of the gospel like that?

When's the last time you fought back those thoughts of despair and grief and sadness with the truth that Jesus has paid the price to set you free, and now nothing can ever separate you from his love?

When's the last time you found yourself so thankful that God saved you through Christ that you couldn't help but tell someone about it, or encourage someone with that same truth?

This is living in light of the gospel.

When you see the wonders and beauty of the cross of Christ, when you let it wash over your heart and overwhelm your mind, then you'll find your actions and thoughts conforming to the character of Christ. Then you'll have enough energy to get through the day; to serve that person one more time; to give a little bit more; to strengthen yourself for what's ahead.

Keep drawing from the living water—the well that never runs dry. The grace of Jesus Christ.

Challenge #2: Pass on the gospel

After Paul challenges Timothy to live in light of the gospel, he then challenges the young leader to pass on the gospel.

Verse two of chapter two says,

“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 2:2 ESV)

The challenge word here is “entrust.” Paul is challenging Timothy to entrust, or to pass on, what he has heard to faithful men and women who are also able to pass it on.

And what is it that Timothy has heard from Paul? The gospel. The truth of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Timothy would have seen Paul testify to this gospel hundreds or thousands of times during their years together.

There are several important things to note about this challenge to pass on the gospel.

Public witness

First, a Christ-centered leader is one whose witness is not a private matter. Their love for Jesus is not a secret to their friends, family, and coworkers. Like Paul, their faith is so explosive that they can easily point to examples of publicly sharing about who Jesus is and what he has done.

Paul passed on the gospel he received, he encouraged others to do the same, and he led by example.

Intentional investment

Second, Paul made passing on the gospel an intentional part of his life. His relationship with Timothy was not the only mentoring relationship he was a part of. The letters to Titus and the various churches make that clear.

Paul intentionally identified and invested in future leaders. He set aside time and energy and resources to build into their lives and show them how to follow Jesus.

As a group leader, you have the opportunity to make a similar investment in your group members' lives. But are you?

Are you taking seriously the call to pass on what you have learned? Do you learn and read with a pen in hand so you can pass it on to someone else, or do you just receive information in one ear and lose it out the other?

Do you have people you've identified as future leaders who you can invest in? Are you showing them how to follow Jesus?

If you're not, you might be wondering where to start. Who do I pass it on to?

Invest in the right people

The third point we can glean from Paul's challenge to pass on the gospel is that we are to pass it on to other faithful men or women who will be able to teach others. This is crucial, so listen closely.

When it comes to investing in someone, we are to identify who has proven themselves to be faithful, and who will be able to teach others. Notice the tenses used.

When it comes to identifying someone who's faithful, we are to look to their current resume for examples of their faithfulness to Jesus. We should be able to point to times where they've displayed faith, courage, wisdom, etc., in the name of and for the sake of Jesus.

So we should be looking for people who have been and who are now faithful to Jesus.

But when it comes to investing in someone who is able to teach others, that's a forward looking goal. Paul said to entrust the gospel to other faithful men and women, "who will be able to teach others also." "Will be" means they aren't necessarily able to do so now.

Let's simplify this. Paul is saying we should pass on the gospel by intentionally investing in other men and women who are faithful to Christ and who will be able to teach others to do the same one day.

That means we invest in those who display a vibrant, active faith in Jesus, and we do the hard work of teaching them so they can turn around and teach others one day.

I've said this before but let me say it again now: "The gospel came *to* you so that it could pass *through* you."

Each of us has the basic call of making disciples on our lives. In order to be faithful to what Jesus has called us to do, we cannot neglect the call to pass on the gospel and train those we pass it on to to do the same.

Challenge #3: Endure for the gospel

So far Paul has challenged us to live in the gospel and to pass on the gospel, now he's going to challenge us to endure for the gospel.

Let's keep reading from chapter two of 2 Timothy with verses three through six:

³ Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. ⁴ No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. ⁵ An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. ⁶ It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.

(2 Timothy 2:3-6 ESV)

Paul's basic challenge here is to share in suffering for the sake of the gospel, or to endure for the sake of the gospel. Paul knew that Timothy was going to face great resistance to much of what he had been commissioned to do. He knew Timothy would suffer for proclaiming his faith and telling people that Jesus was the only way to heaven.

So Paul gives Timothy three illustrations to help flesh out what he's talking about. There's the dedicated soldier, the disciplined athlete, and the hardworking farmer. Each of these illustrations tells us something about what it takes to be built to last.

A dedicated soldier

First, the example of the dedicated soldier tells us that we are not simply participants in a religion but soldiers in a battle. In his letter to the Ephesian church Paul wrote, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the

cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12 ESV).

To be a Christ-follower, and even more so a Christ-centered leader, we must realize that we are engaged in a spiritual battle against very real forces with very real consequences.

This realize the nature of the battles we’re in means we focus on what matters most. This is the point of verse four, where Paul said, “No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.”

Imagine being on the front lines of a war, or being in a foxhole during World War 1 or 2. If you found yourself in that environment, you wouldn’t be wondering what’s for dinner that night. You wouldn’t be browsing Amazon for yet another new pair of shoes.

No, all that would matter is winning the battle at hand and pushing the enemy back.

Too often we get sidetracked and distracted from what matters most. Too often we confuse doing good things for doing God things.

I’m convinced that many of us alive today in our digital world will get to the end of our lives and realize how much more we could have done if we had not been so distracted from what matters most by the things we give ourselves to.

Are you distracted from the mission?

Do you think more about what you’ll eat, wear, or do than how you can live for Jesus and his church? Do you ever ask God what he thinks about major decisions like where you’ll live or work? Do you have so many activities scheduled that you can’t make time for serving the poor or investing in someone’s life?

God, help us to remember that our aim is to please you. Help us to stay focused on pushing forward your mission in and around the world.

A disciplined athlete

Paul’s second illustration of endurance for the gospel was that of a disciplined athlete. He said, “An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.” We all know that, don’t we?

A golfer can’t move their ball wherever they want and still win a tournament. A basketball player can’t tuck the ball and run with it like it’s a football and still win.

If you want to win as an athlete, you have to play according to the rules. To do that takes discipline, and lots of it.

Michael Phelps didn't win his gold medals by swimming a couple times a week. He trained for years and years, multiple times a day to be the athlete he became. That takes an enormous amount of discipline.

And that's Paul's lesson for us here. If we're going to become Christ-centered leaders, we have to become people of discipline. We have to become disciplined to grow in godliness. As Paul told Timothy in his first letter (1 Timothy 4:7), we must train ourselves for godliness.

If you were to write out everything you do in a normal week to grow in godliness, would it reflect someone who is serious about following Jesus?

This isn't about a certain number of events that makes you become more like Jesus; that's not how it works. But at the same time our schedule will reflect our values and beliefs. Our schedule reveals what we think is most important.

I said a minute ago that distraction is one of the greatest spiritual dangers in the world today, and I think that's less because of the devices we have and more because of the lack of self-control we possess.

We're distracted from doing the things of God because we haven't disciplined ourselves to do them.

We don't read the Bible because we stay up too late watching Netflix for another hour and we had to sleep in to get enough rest. We aren't invest in the lives of others because we've involved ourselves and our children in so many activities that we don't have any time to. We don't read books to grow as leaders because we don't have the time to read.

There are, of course, times when much of what life throws at us is out of our control. But that's not the case with everything. There are plenty of activities and events we give our time to that keep us from doing the work God has for us.

This is why the practices of following Jesus have traditionally been called the "spiritual disciplines," because it takes discipline to follow Jesus. If you want to learn more about those disciplines, or practices, I recommend reading Donald Whitney's [*Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*](#).

So to endure for the gospel we must be dedicated soldiers for Christ, we must be disciplined for Christ, and, third, we must work hard for Christ.

A hard working farmer

Paul's third illustration here says, "It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops." Farmers have to put their hands to the plow and to the hard work that's demanded of their crops and allowed by the weather.

There is little or no glory in this hard work. It doesn't earn one acclaim or land them an interview. It's simply the hard, diligent work that's required if they want to enjoy the harvest. If the farmer doesn't plow, he doesn't reap. If he doesn't reap, he doesn't survive.

So much of the work of ministry leadership is like this. We spend time reading the chapter, preparing for the study, or cleaning the house. We put in hard work and sometimes long hours to partner with God in the work he wants to do through us. And sometimes that can be tiring.

That's why Paul wrote this to the Galatian church: "And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9 ESV). Though the work is hard, we press on because of the promise that we will reap eternal life with Christ.

This is an obvious place where the church is needed. We cannot go on like hard working farmers without community or we will grow weary. We were made for community, and one of the primary reasons for that community is so that we can encourage one another to keep pressing on. Or as Hebrews 10:24 puts it, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works."

Unless we are dedicated to Christ, disciplined in Christ, and hard working for Christ, we will not be able to endure for the gospel.

Challenge #4: Remember the hero of the gospel

Now we come to Paul's fourth and final challenge for the young Timothy and for us. Verses eight through thirteen of 2 Timothy chapter two say,

⁸ Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, ⁹ for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ The saying is trustworthy, for:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;

¹³ if we are faithless, he remains faithful—

for he cannot deny himself.

(2 Timothy 2:8-13 ESV)

Paul's final challenge is to remember the hero of the gospel.

There would undoubtedly be times where you want to give up and walk away from leadership in the church. There will be times when you'll want to do anything but discipline yourself to become more like Jesus.

In those moments you must remember Jesus. You must remember that he died for you and for the people around you. You must remember that his Word is not bound and his church cannot lose. You must remember that he is faithful to those who are faithful to him.

As Tony Merida writes, "When your tank is empty, remember that the tomb is empty."² Remember that Jesus no longer occupies a grave, but a throne at the right hand of God.

Nothing will refresh you deeper or sustain you longer than the grace that is found in Jesus.

He's the hero of the gospel. Not you. Not me. But him, and him alone.

Reflection questions

1. Would you say you live in light of the gospel? Meaning, do you find yourself fighting back thoughts of despair and grief and sadness with the truth that Jesus has paid the price to set you free, and now nothing can ever separate you from his love? Or are you so thankful that God saved you through Christ that you can't help but tell someone about it, or encourage someone with that same truth?
2. Are you taking seriously the call to pass on what you have learned? Are you investing in others in ways that will make them capable of doing the same for others later on?
3. Do you think more about what you'll eat, wear, or do than how you can live for Jesus and his church? Do you ever ask God what he thinks about major decisions like where you'll live or work? Do you have so many activities scheduled that you can't make time for serving the poor or investing in someone's life? What could you change?
4. Who is the hero of your gospel? If you're not sure, think about who you point to as the ultimate example of godliness in most cases, or ask yourself where you put your trust.

² Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, p. 167