

Faithful to the Lord

In our text today the apostle Paul refers to three different occupations or activities as examples of how Christians should live in faithfulness. I'd like to ask for a show of hands to see which occupation you identify with most closely. The occupations or activities are soldier, athlete, and farmer. I'll also include the category of none of the above in case you can't identify with these. If you identify most closely with being a soldier, raise your hand. If you identify with being an athlete, raise your hand. If you identify most with being a farmer, raise your hand. How many of you are none of the above? [Comment on which was least common/more common.] We are going to explore why Paul writes to Timothy about these three occupations or activities but first we need a little more background about what is happening with Paul as he writes this letter.

Paul writes his second letter to Timothy while he is in prison at Rome. In fact, Paul is awaiting execution having been condemned under the Emperor Nero's persecution. We know from early Christian accounts that the apostle Peter was also imprisoned at this time. In other words, the two leading apostles, whose many years of service are described in the Book of Acts, are facing death. And in this hour, Paul's thoughts turn to his younger colleagues in ministry and to the people they will serve in the churches. His message for that hour is a call to faithfulness in view of the grace that is in Christ Jesus and His Gospel. So Paul points Timothy to the three occupations in order to teach him about such faithfulness.

First, he writes about soldiers and describes two ways they should be faithful:

Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. (2 Timothy 2:4)

The good soldier endures the bad. Paul is describing ordinary fulfillment of one's duties rather than exceptional service. Forced marches, night watches, harsh weather, rationed food, and hostile enemies all had to be expected. The Roman historian Polybius describes the process of enrollment for soldiers. Military tribunes drafted all able men of age in a particular region for ten years in the cavalry or twenty years of service in the infantry. Each man swore to obey his officers and his orders to the best of his ability. Then the officers dismissed them with orders to return for service at a prescribed date and time. Once a man was enrolled, he was obligated to fulfill his oath and could not return to his former way of life.

So when God enrolled you, you took an oath to serve Him. You did so through the creed at your Baptism. In confirmation the pastor asked, "Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?" And when you're a pastor there is yet another vow all subscribing us to lives of faithfulness.

So how's it going? Are you faithful on all forced marches, on every night watch, no matter which way the wind blows or what hits your plate—to say nothing of God's enemies. Faithfulness does not come easily. In fact it doesn't come from us at all. Break down the word: faithfulness is about *faith*. And here's good news, soldier. Faith is not something you muster up, it is God's gift to you in Christ, through His Word, through His Sacraments. God gives faith—He issues it like uniform, boots, backpack, weapons, and all so that we may be faithful. If you're marching out of step with your Maker, ask Him for faith today, that trust in the heart that believes that Christ gives us a clean record and stands with us through the worst.

Next, Paul points to athletes:

An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. (2 Timothy 2:5)

Paul's not talking about fun and games here. He and later Christian writers used terms of athletic competition to describe temptation, suffering, and even facing death (martyrdom). He has serious competition in mind, the kind of games the devil would play with our lives, and Paul reminds us to compete "according to the rules" or "lawfully," in keeping with God's Law.

When faced with such odds, Christian, rejoice. For as the apostle reminds Timothy later in this letter, that:

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Timothy 4:8)

The crown that awaits your head is not some wreath of laurels or oak leaves or whatever they would hand out at the stadiums and circuses of old. The Lord has a proper crown for you, one forged by the champion, Jesus Christ Himself—a crown of pure righteousness for you.

Finally, Paul describes the faithfulness of a farmer. This one is near and dear to me as the son of a dairy farmer who learned to work from sunrise to sunset. He writes:

It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. (2 Timothy 2:6)

That expression "hard-working" describes the weariness that comes from toil. Do you ever feel that—"bone-tired" we say in English, so tired it runs right to the marrow of your bones!

Paul's writing about the tenant farmers, the peasants who tilled the soil and harvested its fruit but kept a portion of it while the landowner received the rest (cf. Matthew 21). Like them we offer our gifts and service to the Lord but unlike them, our Lord is so generous that He welcomes our paltry offering and gives us His greatest treasure: His very own Son, Jesus Christ. Just as Timothy was called a child of Paul because he inherited Paul's teaching, so we are called children of God because we inherit all our Lord has to offer.

Today we have Rally Day to encourage everyone to attend Sunday School and Bible class, to install our Christian educators, and to recognize the achievements of our students. Just as Paul called his student Timothy to faithfulness, we call one another to faithful study and learning here at Zion. Renew your vow this day to stay faithful to your Lord and to His calling to grow and learn and spread His life-giving Word in this community. May He grant you the endurance of a good soldier, to compete for God's glory like an Olympian, and to share like a diligent farmer in all the blessings of life and salvation that are ours through Christ Jesus our only Savior. Amen.