



All of us know that being a Christian is not easy. In fact, as the years go by, it seems to be getting harder and harder. We have to struggle to make time for the Lord in the midst of increasingly busy lives. The world around us is becoming increasingly corrupt, and more Christians seem to be allured by it. Additionally, the people in the world don't seem to be as receptive to the gospel as they used to be.

If our circumstances seem hard to us, though, we must remember that circumstances in the first century were even more difficult. The Roman Empire was even more corrupt than the modern-day U.S., and whatever pushback we feel like we're getting from the world, at least it's still legal for us to be Christians!

Nonetheless, even in such an unpromising environment, Christianity thrived in the first century, and the Bible tells us the secret. If we're looking for answers about how we can succeed in our time, rather than looking to human wisdom, we should look to the word. This evening,

then, let's consider a text from 2 Timothy that will tell us how we can triumph in our holy calling.

The first section of this text introduces us to TIMOTHY'S SINCERE FAITH. Let's read from 2 Timothy 1:1-7. In this reading, there are two things that catch my attention. The first is the origin of Timothy's faith. Even though Timothy's father was a pagan, he wasn't the first in his family to follow God. Instead, Paul says that he learned his faith from his mother and his grandmother.

This, friends, is something that should make every parent and even grandparent in this room perk up their ears. You worried about how your kids are going to turn out? You worried about how your grandkids are going to turn out? You know what? Me too! I can protect my children for a time, but eventually, they're going to go out into that wicked world on their own. Honestly, I'm already praying about the decisions they will make when that day comes.

For now, though, there's one thing we can do that will have more impact on our kids than anything else. It isn't taking them to a church with great preaching and teaching. It isn't having them involved in all kinds of church activities and programs. It is, simply, being the best Christians we can be, day in and day out. It is living a godly life. It is making a point of teaching them about God and His will for them. It is making sure that they know that of all the things in our lives, being a Christian is the most important. Even doing all that is no guarantee, but it's closer than anything else.

We also need to pay attention, though, when Paul tells us not to be afraid, not for our kids, not for the future, not for anything. We haven't been given a spirit of fear. We've been given a spirit of power, love, and self-control. We are the spiritual descendants of men who faced down hardship, danger, and death for the Lord's sake. We can't let our fear paralyze us like Timothy was paralyzed. Instead, we have to devote ourselves to using God's gifts for Him, so that in this church, both now and in the future, He will be glorified.

Next, Paul explores the topic of SHARING IN SUFFERING. Here, consider 2 Timothy 1:8-12. Paul begins this section with one palatable thought

and one that isn't so palatable. On the one hand, he encourages his audience not to be ashamed. We like that, right? We all like the idea of being fearless, bold, and courageous.

On the other hand, though, he invites us to share in suffering with him. That's not so appealing, especially when our society is so in love with physical ease and pleasure. America, after all, is the country where people climb into their gas-guzzling SUV's to drive 500 feet to the corner store rather than endure the physical discomfort of walking there!

If Paul is telling us to suffer with him, then, he'd better have a pretty good reason! We see that reason, though, in this text. We aren't supposed to suffer for the sake of suffering. We're supposed to suffer for the sake of the gospel. We're supposed to suffer because of the message that Jesus Christ has abolished death and made life and immortality accessible to us. No message can be more important than that, either for us or for those around us. Eternal life hangs in the balance of whether we obey the gospel or not and whether they obey the gospel or not.

Paul says he's willing to suffer because he believes the gospel. He knows Jesus, and he trusts Jesus to keep His word. If we would say the same, we ought to be willing to suffer for the gospel too. Let's put this in perspective. Inviting our neighbor to services, for instance, isn't the being-tortured-for-the-sake-of-Jesus kind of suffering. It's more like the walking-500-feet-to-the-convenience-store kind of suffering. If we aren't willing to do that because of the gospel, do we really believe the gospel? Conversely, if we believe the gospel, we should see nothing to be afraid of in doing that. We might claim to have faith, but our willingness to act reveals whether we truly possess it.

Finally, Paul calls us to follow THE PATTERN OF SOUND WORDS. He explains what he means in 2 Timothy 1:13-18. A first look at this passage reveals that there are two things that Paul regards as the same: following the pattern and guarding the good deposit. Then, he proceeds to list several examples of people who did this and people who didn't. Onesiphorus did, but Phygelus and Hermogenes didn't.

However, notice what each of these three men is doing. This isn't about what we would think of as Bible authority. Instead, it's about helping Paul. Onesiphorus was willing to do that, even at personal risk to himself. On the other hand, when the other two men saw that Paul needed help, they turned away from him.

I think there are two lessons we should draw from this. First, the first-century pattern isn't limited to the work and worship of the church, even though we commonly talk about following the pattern in that context. Instead, the pattern is a lot bigger. Furthermore, everything that we read in the New Testament, from evidence about how the church should spend its money to how we individually ought to respond to brethren in need, all of it is part of the same pattern, and we can't separate those things from one another.

In practice, here's what this means. A congregation that "does all in the name of the Lord" and faithfully goes through the five acts of worship every Sunday but is filled with vicious, mean-spirited people isn't following the pattern. Conversely, a congregation that is filled with kind, warm-hearted people but isn't interested in imitating the worship of the first-century church isn't following the pattern either. Both churches are wrong in different ways, but they're both wrong.

We have to be careful, then, of pitting different parts of God's will for us against each other, or of emphasizing one part at the expense of another part. Some things are more important than others—love, for instance—but everything that God tells us is important, and we're not at liberty to reject any of it. A faithful servant of God is faithful in following the full pattern, especially in the things that we find ourselves least drawn to. That's how we guard what we have been given.

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