



2 Timothy 2:1-13

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, 2 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. 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. 7 Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

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.

I doubt there's hardly a person in this room who has not heard the radio program Unshackled at least once in their lives. The program has been producing radio dramas of miraculous conversions for the past sixty three years and is run on 2600 radio stations around the world. One thing you gotta love about the program is that they produce the show to sound like we are still living in the 1950's. It has the old-timey radio drama feel to it. But who cares, because the stories of lives being unshackled by the gospel are too good to resist. If you don't like to listen to another testimony of saving faith then I think you should take your spiritual temperature and see if you are alright.

This passage in 2 Timothy is also about being unshackled but specifically the thing that is unshackled is the word of God. As Paul lie in his prison cell chained as a criminal, you can

almost hear him yelling as he wrote these words. *I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!*

Even if the best missionaries and pastors are chained in a prison cell somewhere in the world—and there are plenty of them right now—the word of God can never be chained. Even if you and I refuse to proclaim the Lord to the lost people in the world, the effectiveness of the word of God cannot be bound.

But the unshackled nature of God's word does not allow us to be passive and lazy. Instead, you and I are to be good soldiers, disciplined athletes and hard working farmers in the vineyard of God's kingdom.

The first analogy is that of a soldier. *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.* You'll notice that Paul is still on the topic of sharing in suffering from chapter one but he applies it to serving as a soldier. This might be an appropriate time to sing "I'm in the Lord's Army" if I hadn't done it a couple weeks ago. Believe me—I am NOT going to sing that one again because my kids told me that I did the motions all wrong. Apparently, I can't even get a simple children's song right! ☺

When you think about it, the analogy of a soldier could have been used in a lot of different ways. Paul could have talked about the importance of unity among the soldiers. He could have brought out the toughness and endurance of a soldier. There are lots of directions he could have gone. But instead he emphasized the desire of a soldier to please his commanding officer.

Paul hits on the heart of human nature. Every person on the planet is driven to please someone. It starts when we are very little. The toddler slowly climbs to the top of the slide and what does he say at the top? "Mommy, watch me go down the slide!" We don't put stick figure, crayon pictures on our refrigerator because our kids are going to become the next Picasso. We do it because we are proud of them. We all want to know that someone is proud of us, which is another way of saying that we want to please others. We *will* please someone. It is inevitable. It is what drives us. We may work to please our parents, our families, the guy down the street or maybe—and here's a crazy idea—what if we worked to please God?

This is what Paul was driving at in the analogy of the good soldier. Our commanding officer is Jesus Christ and a good soldier will want to please his or her commanding officer. But the challenge is that we can think that if we please God that we will be unhappy. God has all of these rules and restrictions, right? Working to please God is like watching one of those pharmaceutical commercials about the latest wonder drug. They promise something wonderful but they come with all of these restrictions and side effects. "This little yellow pill will grow hair on your head, make you lose weight, give you six-pack abs and it will chop your onions without making you cry. Side effects may include but are not limited to drowsiness, nausea, depression, weight gain, hair loss, blindness, death and teary eyes when you chop onions." We've got to get past the idea that pleasing God is boring or restrictive. Pleasing God not only pleases God, but it is for our good and enjoyment as well.

I've been reading this book, *When God Writes Your Love Story*. Moms and dads, don't wait until your kids are teenagers before you read this book. As soon as they emerge from the toddler years would be a good time to start talking about relationships. This book is great and one of the big ideas is that we first need to learn how to trust God with dating and our future spouses. The husband and wife writing team both grew up as Christians in a Christian family. Both though they were following the basic Christian idea that you can do whatever you want in a dating relationship as long as you date a Christian who goes to church and you don't "go all the way." Both thought that they were completely in charge of their own dating plans and if God ever got involved, he's just mess it up. Listen to how Eric described his feelings.

"If there is one thing in all of life that we feel sure God has no clue about, it's romance. No way was I going to be the fool who trusted God with my love life and ended up a Robinson Crusoe type of guy with a long white beard, shipwrecked on the island of singleness."¹

Do you see—what they were saying that if they truly sought to please the Lord in their relationships with the opposite sex, that God's rules and restrictions would prevent their ultimate happiness. But what they found was that as soon as they turned control over to God, everything went from bad to great. It didn't happen overnight and there is no magic formula but they discovered that pleasing God is ultimately good for them as well.

But so far I skipped the first half of the soldier principle. Let's read it again. *No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.* The question before us this: How do we know if we are becoming entangled in civilian pursuits? Where and how do you draw the line? This is where legalism comes into play. Legalism attaches all manner of rules and restrictions that the Bible never mentions because these rules make it easier to live as a Christian in a fallen world. If you spend all of your time in the do's and don'ts, then you don't have to concern yourself with asking the real and harder question—Am I pleasing God? And when you ask that question, don't ask it in the sense of if you are breaking a specific command or not. Don't ask, "Did I do anything wrong" but rather "Am I doing it right? Am I seeking to please God?" and if your heart is bent that way, then you will need to first understand what it means to please God. You won't just worry about avoiding certain sins but you will concentrate on living a lifestyle of righteousness. You will live as a good soldier of Jesus Christ and will truly want to please your commanding officer.

Before we go onto the next analogy, I want you to notice that each of these analogies have rewards built into them. "Pleasing God" is itself a reward because we know that it brings glory to the Lord but also is the best option for us. Pleasing God is not restrictive but the most freeing place you could ever be. So as we move through the next two analogies, see if you can pick up on the reward.

Athletic analogy: An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. The reward is quite clear—being crowned as an athletic champion. Paul had in mind the real Olympic games which started in Olympia, Greece. It is possible that Paul may have even witnessed one of the Olympic Games held, as they still are today, every four years. One thing was certain—you had to follow the rules. Each participant had to be free citizen and had to commit to the ten month training period. "If an athlete was caught cheating, perhaps through

bribing or poisoning, he was forced to finance a statue of Zeus where his and his family's name would be put and what he had done. Then the statue was put near the entrance of the stadium, so that the athletes would see them before the games started as a reminder of what could happen.”²

Today the punishment for cheating is much worse. While you no longer have to finance a statue of Zeus, you do have to appear on Oprah and make a full confession. Everyone, especially cyclists, loved Lance Armstrong. No one had ever dominated a sport like he did which is why the reality of his cheating—which was systematic and brutal—was so shocking.

But the key to being crowned a victor is to compete according to the rules. Once again there are all kinds of applications which could be drawn from this but the immediate context of this chapter implies that a true athlete is willing to suffer for their faith. The theme of sharing in suffering dominates this passage. A believer who wants a victor's crown will play by the rules. They are willing to suffer for the crown. They are willing to be self-disciplined. They are not willing to take any shortcuts.

I think one of the hardest things to teach children is not to take shortcuts. It's hard enough to get them to do a certain job, like doing dishes or cleaning their room but how do you also get them to do a complete job? A child can say, “Look, mom, the dishes are done.” So you walk into the kitchen and see the result. Well, yes, most of the dishes look like they are clean, but how many still have food stuck on them? How many are still sitting in the sink? Is the counter wiped off or is it dripping all over the floor?

A great time to see a shortcut is when a group of kids race around the yard. Since there are no defined lanes or track, the race turns into a free for all. The fastest kids take off and look like they are going to win for sure until some of the slower kids realize that if they shave off the corners a bit, they can pass the faster kids and finish ahead of them. A backyard race is not that big of a deal but the problem is when we carry shortcuts into our teen and adult years. And then we take the word shortcut and give it a fancy name—rationalization. We're a little smarter and can create excuses as fast as a cat can make hairballs. We read something in the Bible or listen to a particular sermon and work hard at figuring out ways that it doesn't apply to us.

Shortcuts, excuses, rationalization, cheating. Whatever you call, it comes down to a matter of the heart. Do you actually *want* to please the Lord or do you just want everyone to *think* that you do. And the worst part about a shortcut is that you miss out on the victor's crown. You miss the reward of a life pleasing to the Lord. And like Eric Ludy who did not want to live life like Robinson Crusoe on the island of singleness, we don't even know what we are missing out on. We don't realize that God has something far better for us if we only yield to his ways and his will.

The third and final analogy complements the first two. *It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.* The Christian life is a long, strenuous process like sowing and planting and trusting God for the increase yet we want a microwave faith. If it takes longer than 30 seconds, we don't want it. If I can't compress my Bible reading and prayer into five minutes, then it can't be done.

I don't think it's that we are naturally lazy. Most of us work hard in our careers and at home. We are not afraid of hard work but we don't tend to link hard work with our faith. We are saved by grace, not by hard work so we think that our ongoing faith should be by grace and not by hard work. That is a warning well worth heeding. In fact the entire book of Galatians warns against trusting in your good works. *Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?*³

We are saved by grace and we are kept by grace but within that safety of grace we are repeatedly told to work hard, like a good farmer, like an elite athlete, like a good soldier of Jesus Christ. Here are several more examples from three different NT writers.

Ephesians 4:3—**Make every effort** to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Hebrews 4:11—Let us, therefore, **make every effort** to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.

2 Peter 2:10—Therefore, my brothers and sisters, **make every effort** to confirm your calling and election.

One of the great comforts in the NT is the armor of God passage in Ephesians 6. Paul instructs us to put on the whole armor of God because “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.” The inescapable conclusion is that this is an invisible battle that we cannot win. Without the armor of God we cannot be a good soldier of Jesus Christ. Without the armor of God, we cannot possibly win this unseen, constant and deadly battle. In others, the battle belongs to the Lord.

Even though this battle is unwinnable without the Lord and his armor, notice how much hard work and effort is still required of us.

13 Therefore **take up** the whole armor of God, that **you may be able to withstand** in the evil day, and **having done all, to stand firm.** **14** Stand therefore, **having fastened** on the belt of truth, and having **put on** the breastplate of righteousness, **15** and, as shoes for your feet, having **put on** the readiness given by the gospel of peace. **16** In all circumstances **take up** the shield of faith, with which **you can extinguish** all the flaming darts of the evil one; **17** and **take** the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, **18** **praying** at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end **keep alert** with all perseverance, **making supplication** for all the saints.

Make no mistake—the victor in this battle is assured. Christ has already won the battle. In fact, this is why we are to take up the armor of God. We arm ourselves and fight not so that we can win but because we have already won. So then why fight if the battle has been won? We fight because even though the victor is certain, the battle still rages on.

When I hear Christians talking about this unseen spiritual warfare, they often say things like this. “We must be doing something right because Satan really seems to be attacking us.” Or they’ll say, Satan and his armies fight the hardest when you are walking with the Lord. The truly spiritual person gets attacked the hardest because Satan does not need to bother with the lukewarm believer.”

Have you had conversations like this? The implication is that the harder you fight in the battle, the harder Satan will fight back. Therefore, if you don’t try very hard, Satan will just leave you alone. I have heard this kind of thinking more times than I can count. But just think about the message we are sending here. If you actively fight the battle as a good soldier of Jesus Christ fully arrayed in battle armor, you will get constantly pummeled with fiery darts from the evil one. But, if you just stay out of the battle, Satan will leave you alone. You’re not in the battle so he doesn’t worry about you. Now think about it. Would you rather get shot at with an endless volley of fiery darts or would you rather Satan just leave you alone? You see, when you frame the question this way, it’s a no brainer. Is it possible that we are sending the wrong message about spiritual warfare? Because if I had a clear cut choice, I would most definitely choose not to be attacked. So then are we sending the subtle message that you are actually safer if you are not engaged in the battle?

There is always a grain of truth in things like this because I agree with the idea that if you are not engaged in the battle, Satan will just leave you alone. But let me explain why that is true using a description of a battle that took place in 48 BC.

Caesar’s Men, notwithstanding their being surprised, defended themselves beyond imagination, and though they were overwhelmed with darts and arrows, though four centurions had lost each of them an eye, and that all the soldiers, without exception, were wounded, nevertheless, unequal as it was, they maintained the fight for above fifteen hours. Sceva, one of the centurions, who defended the castle gate, being wounded in the eye, in the shoulder and the thigh, stretched out his hand to the enemy, as if making a sign of surrendering himself, and as two of their officers advanced towards him, he attacked them both with his sword, one after another. There was found within the place thirty thousand arrows, which they presented to Caesar when he came back, with the shield of Sceva, which had been pierced with two hundred and thirty shots.⁴

Can you imagine such a battle? Thirty thousand arrows and one centurion’s shield with 230 arrows stuck in it. This is the very kind of battle that Paul had in mind when he wrote this chapter in Ephesians. There is no such thing as escaping the battle. This unseen, spiritual warfare goes on 24/7 whether we realize it or not. No matter how lazy or unspiritual you are, you cannot choose to leave the battle. It rages around you at all times. So in what sense is it true that Satan will leave you alone? Well, tell me this? What would have happened to the centurion Sceva if he had not been carrying a shield? Those 230 arrows would have been sticking in his body! So do you see now why Satan will leave you alone? If he or one of his soldiers sees you with hundreds of arrows sticking out of you, he knows you are of no concern. Fortunately, the arrows do not kill you nor can Satan come along and finish you off. But you are severely wounded and lie there virtually useless for the King’s battle.

But some of you will think, “I am not sure I am actively engaged in this battle but neither do I feel like I have arrows stuck in me.” Don’t forget that this is an unseen battle therefore the arrows themselves are invisible. But I guarantee you they are there. They just manifest themselves in different ways.

Do you want to know how many arrows are sticking out of you? We don’t have time to explain the full armor of God but it can be summarized like this: the amount of armor you are wearing is directly proportional to the amount of time you spend reading, meditating and applying the word of God.

Let’s do a quick little test. Think about how much time in your day is spent taking in negative or ungodly messages. If you work in the marketplace, chances are much of your day is like this. You listen to people complain all day and maybe join in yourself. Swear words are thrown about in every conversation. People talk about the disgusting things they did with their free time. People are having affairs, etc. When you listen to the radio, how much secular and potentially harmful lyrics pass through your mind? When the TV plays throughout the day, what percentage is Godly and edifying? When you surf the web, read books and magazines, how much negative media pours into your heart and mind?

Much of this is unavoidable because you can’t avoid going to work but much of it is completely voluntary. We intentionally expose ourselves to these things. Now don’t get me wrong. I am not saying it is sinful to watch a little TV or listen to a secular song now and then. But if you add up all of the time spent on these pursuits and their potentially negative influence, everyone in this room will probably have at least one hour every day and many will have multiple hours. Here’s the quick test. Mentally put those hours of time spent in one column. Now, in the column next to it, put the number of hours spent each day in Bible reading, meditation and application. The degree to which these columns are lopsided tells you how many arrows are sticking out of you right now.

As Paul said while bound in chains as a criminal—*the word of God is not bound!* God and his word will accomplish his purposes with or without us. Despite endless attempts to destroy and suppress it, God’s word is never bound but you and I can be bound by the arrows piercing us and leaving us wounded, weak and not useful to the King’s battle. Next week we will look in depth at this battle armor so we will know how to fight as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

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¹ Eric and Leslie Ludy, *When God Writes Your Love Story*, Multnomah Books: Colorado Springs, © 2009, p. 40.

² <http://www.katakolon-greece.com/greece-olympia.html>

³ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1984 (Ga 3:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ [THE HISTORY OF THE TRIVMIRATE 5. The First that of Julius Cæsar, Pompey and Crafits.](#)