

Leadership Principles & the Pastoral Epistles – 2015
WEEK 4: EMBRACE HARDSHIP

Interpretive comments on 2 Tim. 2:3-13

Transformational leaders understand that Christian leadership includes embracing the hardships that come with being a Christian leader (2:3-13, which is an elaboration of 1:8; see also 4:5).

Paul devoted more space to this element than the other five. Perhaps this is because Timothy was fearful and especially prone to avoid suffering. In a culture that is more addicted to comfort and averse to suffering than any other culture in history, it is especially relevant to us as well.

“Although souls are won only by the sovereign power of God through the Holy Spirit, yet . . . souls are ‘hardly’ won—not by the slick, automatic application of a formula, but by tears and sweat and pain, in prayer, in sacrificial personal friendship, and in other ways.”¹

Read 2:3. Note first of all that Paul does not say: “Be willing to suffer if you can’t avoid it.” Of course, we are not to seek suffering (not that any of us are tempted to do so!). He says “Suffer hardship” (see also 1:8b – “Join with me in suffering for the sake of the gospel”). The assumption is not only that suffering is unavoidable in authentic Christian ministry, but that we should actively embrace this part of our role (see also 1 Pet. 4:1,2).

“There is much suffering that we can avoid if we wish; but if we are to be of use to the Lord, it is a fundamental necessity that we make a deliberate choice of the path of suffering for His sake. Unless we acquire a disposition to suffer for Him, the work we do will be of a very superficial quality.”²

What kinds of hardships must we embrace?

In 2:4-6 Paul uses three illustrations to describe the specific kinds of hardships which we are to embrace—a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer.

Read 2:4. Like a soldier on active duty, we must embrace the hardship of staying *focused* on the work and staying unentangled by the affairs of everyday life. When you are in the reserves, you can focus primarily on your career, your hobbies, etc. But when you are on active duty, everything changes—you must integrate everything else around the demands of the war. This is why, during the Blitz, British citizens reminded one another that “There’s a war on.” We are at war, Christ has called us into active service, and we must stay focused in our *affections* on the high calling of *pleasing* the One who enlisted us.

Be conscientious in your home and work duties (cf. Col. 3,4; Eph. 5,6; 1 Pet. 2,3), of course, but do so as representatives of Jesus, as part of your ministry—not as separate parts of your life with its own separated affections.

Keep a close eye on your affections. What gives you joy? What do you look forward to? What makes you most angry and downcast if you do not get it? If your affections are straying to worldly lusts—whether socially unacceptable (e.g., porn; gluttony; etc.) or socially acceptable (e.g., more enthusiasm for sports team, TV shows, etc.)—this is a signal that your heart is being seduced from love for God motivated by His love for you (1 Jn. 2:15,16).

Soldierly hardships also include the sufferings of the battle itself, including demonic (Eph. 6:10-13) and human persecution (see 2 Tim. 1:8; 3:11,12). You must expect to be attacked by Satan, and you must aggressively and firmly resist him (1 Pet. 5:8-10).

¹ John R. W. Stott, Lecture on 2 Timothy 2.

² Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Worker* (Fort Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1971), p. 91.

Read 2:5. Like an athlete, we must embrace the hardship of competing according to the rules (*disciplined*). The athlete's rules included two aspects:

The rules of the contest (e.g., not changing lanes in a race). Breaking these rules resulted in disqualification. Similarly, there are things that will disqualify us as Christian leaders (e.g., SEXUAL SIN; FINANCIAL MISCONDUCT; AUTHORITARIAN SELF-WILL; LAZINESS; BAD MARRIAGE). These are not existential falls from grace—they are disqualifying actions that are preceded by inordinate affections (see above). Please don't wait until you are disqualified and disgrace Jesus' reputation! Learn grace-motivated repentance to nip this in the bud, and seek help as soon as you realize you are losing this battle.

The rules of training (e.g., conditioning; skills practice; proper diet). No athlete expects to do well in the contest if he has not trained diligently. Similarly, there are the disciplines of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7b,8) that undergird all effective spiritual ministry (e.g., PREP FOR TEACHING; QUIET TIME; RESPONDING TO SPIRIT'S CORRECTION & GUIDANCE). Most of this is "private"—between you and God, when no one else is watching. Yet here is where vision and motivation and guidance are either gained or forfeited. This is difficult for all of us, and our church may not have emphasized this sufficiently in past years. But let's make progress, and help one another by asking, encouraging, doing with, etc.

Read 2:6. Like a farmer, we must embrace the hardship of *working hard* and working consistently. Christian leadership, like unmechanized farming, involves an amazing amount of ongoing strenuous (*kopiao*) and unglamorous toil without immediate results (e.g., DISCIPLESHIP; PRIVATE & CORPORATE PRAYER; TEACHING THE WORD ["in season & out of season"]; "ONE ANOTHERING" OUR PEOPLE; SOWING SEED).

This is why we *must* be motivated by something beyond short-term results! Many of us were spoiled by easy short-term results in previous years, and we got dismayed and discouraged when the work got slow and difficult. In spite of my own warnings to others during a period of "easy harvest" a few years ago, I fell victim to this myself when things got more difficult. How easily our motivations become carnal, and how "out of season" periods expose these carnal motivations! This is why we must be foundationally motivated by gratitude for God's grace, by the joy of living a self-giving life of love, and by trust that God will grant a harvest in His way and in His timing.

SUMMARY: Notice in each illustration the connection between the willingness to embrace this hardship and the positive outcome. *While our hard work and suffering cannot by themselves guarantee the advance of God's kingdom, our unwillingness to suffer can prevent its advancement.* This is why Watchman Nee says: "In some places there is no ingathering of the harvest for the simple reason that there are too many Christians who dislike work."³

Repenting from self-indulgence

Does this convict you? Consider the wise words of Jack Miller:

"Perhaps you are the one who must admit that you give your people little to model themselves after. It is therefore not surprising that they lack the zeal and effectiveness of the Thessalonian church's evangelism . . . The (leader) functioning as a servant and brother knows that *work* is the operative word for his calling: (he) is a *working* model for his people. Like Epaphroditus he may be called to labor in self-giving right to the door of death (Phil. 2:28-30), to study diligently as a scribe in the kingdom (Matt. 13:52; 2 Tim. 2:15), and to agonize in prayer for men (Col. 2:1-3; 4:12-13).

On a daily basis, this means that self-indulgence must be put to death . . . It takes the form of physical laziness and sluggishness of spirit, which readily fosters fear. Personal timidity and physical exhaustion often seem to issue from the poisoned conscience of the slothful leader. It works like this: the (leader) neglects his calling in the community, grows weary of study, and finds his preaching and teaching

³ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Worker*, p. 15.

a burden. He also thinks he needs more sleep. And his fear of people grows. Other sins soon spin out of his disobedient life. Legalistic penance, wheel-spinning, the aggressive pushing of secondary causes in the church, the neglect of matters of first importance - he indulges it all.

To be rid of this burden of self-indulgence, go to Christ, the perfect Advocate with the Father (1 Jn. 2:1,2). By faith hand the sins over to Him. Be specific as you confess your transgressions, and then trust His forgiveness. He promises it (1 Jn. 1:8-10) . . . At the same time, ask the Lord to search out your heart for related sins, such as daydreaming and fantasizing. What you may learn is that the pride that keeps you daydreaming is the fundamental cause of your laziness. You may have been too proud to let the Lord search you and root out your pet sins, whatever they were. Take them seriously. Don't be afraid to grieve over them (Jas. 4:6-10).

But be comforted. The Holy Spirit will help you (Ps. 139:23,24). Christ will write the Father's laws and love on your heart (Ezek. 36:24, 25; 1 Thess. 3:5). And remember, repentance is normal for the believer, his way of responding to Christ and drawing near to the Father (Luke 15:20-24)."⁴

So repent of your self-indulgence, remember that you serve a God of grace, give yourself to Him anew—and ask the Lord to show you what He wants to work on right now (read 2:7). If you are like me, you will need to do this many times over the years!

What will motivate us to embrace these hardships?

Periodic repentance is necessary—but it is not sufficient for going the distance down this path. This is why Paul couples the challenging imperatives of 2:3-6 with the wonderful indicatives of 2:8-13. Paul is showing Timothy how to “be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2:1) so that he can embrace hardships! Let's think carefully about these provisions.

First, there is the example of Jesus (read 2:8). This verse seems to be more than simply a reminder to remember and preach the gospel. Paul will take this up in 2:14-19. The key phrase seems to be “raised from the dead.” At the heart of Paul's gospel is the message that the promised Messiah (“descendant of David”) comes into his glorious rule *through* suffering and death (“raised from the dead”).⁵

Jesus embraced this hardship for the sake of *our* salvation! Meditating on the amazing Love that would willingly choose this path for people as sinful as us will motivate us to willingly follow in his footsteps (Heb. 12:1-3). Notice how Paul traces Jesus' *renunciation* of his heavenly prerogatives, his *humiliation* on the cross, and his consequent *exaltation* (Phil. 2:6-11). Notice how Paul says this motivates him to follow this same three-fold path (Phil. 3:7-11).

Second, there is the example of Paul (read 2:9,10). Jesus has also called us to follow His “cruciform” pattern of life (Jn. 12:24-26), and has promised us that it will result in the spread of His life to others. Paul embraced this path and modeled it for Timothy—and he is experiencing the fruit of this path. Even now, the hardship of his imprisonment has been the means through which the gospel has spread (2:9; see 4:16,17 & Phil. 1:12-14).⁶ Salvation (justification and sanctification) comes *to* the chosen *through* Paul's suffering (2:10).

⁴ C. John Miller, *Powerful Evangelism for the Powerless* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1997), pp. 86,87.

⁵ “There is another reason why Timothy must ‘remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David’. It is not just because these facts constitute the gospel which Timothy must preach, but because they also illustrate, from Jesus Christ's own experience, the principle that death is the gateway to life and suffering the path to glory. For he who died rose from the dead, and he who was born in lowliness as David's seed is now reigning in glory on David's throne. Both expressions set forth in embryonic form the contrast between humiliation and exaltation.” John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*.

⁶ “I am chained, but the Word of God is not chained” is not simply a contrast—it is *causal* (“so that”).

See Paul's broader description of this path (2 Cor. 4:7-12,15). Think of the people who have helped you come to Christ and/or grow in him. Think of the people whose spiritual life you most admire. You will *always* find that they have suffered deeply, and that they attribute their spiritual fruitfulness in large part to the sufferings through which God has taken them (Jn. 15:2). Ask them if it has been worth it. You will find that they testify to God's goodness and are so grateful for his loving wisdom and sovereignty. Their God is also your God. The God who has fashioned their lives into a fruitful branch can do the same with your life. Let their example inspire you to give yourself more fully into God's hands!

Third, there are the promises of God's eternal kingdom that He makes to all Christians (read 2:11-13). If we have died with Jesus (by taking up his cross?), we will definitely live with him forever in his kingdom. Further, if we endure sufferings in his service, we will reign with him in the next life (Lk. 19:17,19; Matt. 19:27-30). He will more than make it up to us!

How much do you think about this? Is there a connection between your answer and your attitude toward suffering? This was tremendously motivating and strengthening to Paul (Rom. 8:18 and 2 Cor. 4:16-18), and it can be for us, too.

Joseph Tson says about Christians willing to be martyred in Muslim countries: "They'll go to heaven." My wife says, "American Christians need to quit trying to make this world like heaven and get on with the war so we can have the real thing."

If you want to follow Paul's direction to embrace hardship, you will also need to serve with others who also want to do this. Even Paul, who was amazingly tough, said that being without a fellow-worker was the last resort (1 Thess. 3:1,2). It is very difficult to stay involved in ministry long-term without true co-workers. You can spur one another on. You can encourage one another when you are depleted. You can laugh with one another during difficult times, and this provides valuable respite. Do you have fellow-workers?

Conclusion

We conclude with two quotes that connect embracing hardships with real joy:

"Just as faith is indispensable if we are to maintain joy in daily life, so is surrender. If we cling to anything in life, even a good thing, that thing will surely take away our joy . . . Each of these texts implies that Christians constantly give up things that they like to keep in order to experience the freedom God intends them to have. The most important thing that we surrender is our own self—our desire to control our lives. Of course, we don't surrender and go into a vacuum. We surrender something in order to cling to God only. Surrender is the means to enjoying more fully the most beautiful thing in our lives—our joyous love relationship with God . . . Often the things we have to surrender are not easy to give up—things like our health, our convenience, our comfort, or our reputation . . . For a biblical Christian, rather than being something to dread, surrender can become the gateway to an exciting adventure. We know that God will bring something good out of every situation. Even as we go through pain, this truth sustains us and we wonder, 'How will God do it this time?' We anticipate his deliverance with holy longing. And when we see what he has done, our joy is complete!"⁷

A former student of this class emailed the following comment: "Week 4 of your leadership class is entitled "Embrace Hardships." I read that title over and over in class and realized I had no category for that perspective (and was kind of horrified). I have had the perspective of enduring suffering (after wrestling with God much on even this), but never embracing it. I had dismissed anything that active as asceticism. So I decided to look through all of the scriptures and pray for wisdom. To me, embracing is an active position but enduring is fairly passive. After reading through the passages on suffering, I agree that embracing is a better descriptor of the stance we are called to. I also think that this is where the joy comes in. Unless we are more active than passive in suffering, we miss out on experiencing the joy God has for us. Good things

⁷ Ajith Fernando, *The Call to Joy & Pain*, pp. 43-46.

need to be fought for. As I was processing all this, I began to see that adopting a perspective of embracing suffering radically changed my views on my daily interactions with people. There is much suffering that I can sidestep (especially relational) without my conscience hurting (maybe I have issues here). However, when I adopt the perspective of embracing suffering, I begin to see things differently. Conflicts can be positive opportunities to enter into difficult situations to bless people rather than unnecessary difficulties to avoid.”