

II Timothy 2:1-7 The grace of Christian discipline

Introduction

The apostle Paul in this final letter to his devoted follower and young pastor, Timothy, passes on advice about the way he was expecting him to discharge his responsibilities as a follower of Jesus Christ. It was a high and noble calling but also required the grace of Christian discipline and self denial in order to be the person God wished Him to be in His service in the years that remained of His life on earth. This is exactly the same for every man and woman, boy and girl who owns the name of 'Christian'. In any walk of life there may be some inspiration and evidence of talent and an ability to accomplish the demands of that discipline. However, there is also perspiration as well as inspiration in its fulfilment. Ignace Jan Paderewski, the great pianist, was once being offered extravagant praise by an admirer of his musical talents. His response was simple and to the point. 'Madam, before I was a genius, I was a drudge' [R Kent Hughes, *Discipline of a Godly Man*, p. 224] Years and years of hard graft in private was the price to pay for becoming an inspirational concert pianist. Sir Donald Bradman, the great Australian cricketer, was possibly the greatest batsman to have played test cricket. His average score in first-class matches was an astonishing 99.94 runs per innings. The magnitude of this achievement is only realised when it is revealed that the second best batsman in Cricketing history Indian Sachin Tendulkar has a first-class average of 57.89 runs per innings. He may be better remembered as the first man to score one hundred international hundreds and more than 30,000 first-class runs in total. Figures that like Bradman's batting average may never be surpassed. Biographers have focused on the dedication of young Bradman learning to play the game with a single stump and a golf ball. This was true to a degree, but his efforts in junior cricket were modest and his batting scores unremarkable amongst his peers. There was no indication of the astonishing success that would follow in his professional career. However, what is most important to note here was the foundation instilled in him by his parents. Bradman 'described cricket not so much as recreation, or even patriotic expression, but as a moral education. "First my parents taught me to be a cricketer off the field as well as on. It was not 'did you win' but 'did you play the game' that made the man." To Bradman, cricket was a peerless builder of character: 'I have no doubt that it moulds in an individual the right type of character better than any other sport. If that can be substantiated, no other recommendation is required, because character must surely be one of the greatest assets any nation through its citizens can possess.' He never budged from this conviction. [www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2008/August...] You may or may not recognise the modern game of cricket from this description where winning at all costs has become a corrosive element of the game. If that was not enough of a problem, the conviction of a steady trickle of players for participating in efforts to fix games for money to assist gambling syndicates has also cast an unwanted shadow over this professional game.

As Christians our calling is not to look to others around us to be set our standards by looking to the head of the Church the Lord Jesus Christ and focussing on Him. Hebrews 12:1-2 expresses it this way: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.* What does Paul emphasize here to Timothy?

1. The calling of a Christian Disciple (II Timothy 2:1-2)

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. ²And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. Paul has been very conscious of people who have started out on a Christian pathway

but was deeply saddened by a number of fellow Turkish Christians who had consciously walked away from their earlier profession. II Timothy 1:13-15 states: *What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus.* ¹⁴ **Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.** ¹⁵ *You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes.* Who these people were and how many of them are details lost in the mists of time. What is significant for Timothy as the pastor of this Turkish congregation and for us today is what the apostle has to suggest as the remedy for this problem. He urges Timothy and us to be deeply grounded in the truth of God's Word; to base our lives upon it and in a self-disciplined way to keep our lives in line with it as followers of Jesus. If we keep our eyes on Him and obey His teaching then we will not stray far from the pathway He has marked out for us in life. In essence, in modern language, Paul is stressing the importance of Christian discipleship. This subject is an area of church life that is being worked on by a task group just now. They will be reporting back to us in the near future with recommendations as to how we can be more effective in helping one another develop more fully and effectively our relationship with the Lord Jesus through prayer and reading His Word and other spiritual disciplines. A gardener who leaves their garden to tend itself will soon find that the weeds will choke the plants and over time remove even the traces of their presence. We have a responsibility to cultivate our relationship with the Lord through our personal devotions; our collective gatherings for worship, together with one-to-one or small group opportunities to encourage one another in following Him.

Paul has laid down the foundation of objective truth on which our faith is grounded. This deposit must be guarded and affirmed by the people of God, especially those entrusted to positions of leadership in its ranks. It is based on our testimony of faith in Jesus. II Timothy 1:12: *I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day.* Do you have a personal testimony of faith in the Lord Jesus? Has there been a time when you entrusted your life to Him? If you have said 'yes' to this question then there will be a person or people who come to mind who words and whose life has in some way communicated the truth of this Gospel to you, which pointed you to Jesus. Christian men have a duty to encourage and support those men younger in the faith-who might also but not necessarily be younger in years. In a similar manner Christian women have that same duty to disciple younger women in the faith to enable them to grow into the people God wants them to be. We are very conscious that the race of life is a relay race and we both receive and are called to pass on the baton of the Gospel to other people, that they in turn might disciple another generation of followers of Jesus. Paul commends people with two qualities. First of all reliability- that self-discipline to live a consistent Christian life; none of us will do it perfectly, but all of us can attain a good level of consistency with an appropriate self discipline. The second quality stated here is the ability to communicate Gospel truths by words. Now this occurs at different levels. There are the outstanding theologians and preachers such as Jim Packer, John Stott and John Piper; others such as Chris Wright or Wayne Grudem whose books have encouraged and inspired many people. Or more popular communicators such as A.W. Tozer on Worship and Christian Discipleship or John Blanchard on apologetic themes; at a local level there are pastors and lay-preachers; house-group leaders, together with small group ministries facilitators of outreach initiatives such as Christianity Explored or Alpha. Yet each one of us at the individual level can pass on to someone else what we have learned from following Jesus with a view to encourage them in their journey of faith. Are you willing and available to be a man or woman who can serve in this way?

Having established the principles of our calling as Christian disciples the apostle Paul uses three metaphors to illustrate what it means to live our lives for Jesus Christ.

2. The Disciple as a dedicated soldier (II Timothy 2:3-4)

³ *Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.* ⁴ *No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer.* This is not theoretical stuff to Paul as he is writing this letter from prison. He is well aware of the military-style discipline required to accomplish his calling as a pioneering church-planter. He has spoken about the spiritual armour which the Christian soldier should wear (Ephesians 6) and in his letters to co-workers has used phrases such as *fighting the good fight* (I Timothy 1:18); *fighting the good fight of the faith* (I Timothy 6:12); *in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left* (II Corinthians 6:7); *for though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.* (II Corinthians 10:3-4); however, here the emphasis is not on the armour or weapons of the Christian soldier, instead drawing attention to the dedication in service and a willingness to suffer for his faith. In the light of such a calling there will be hardship, risk and suffering as a matter of course. Tertullian (160-225AD), a supremely self-disciplined and ascetic Christian leader wrote the following words in his *Address to Martyrs* (ch.2, paragraph 3): ‘No soldier comes to the war surrounded by luxuries, nor goes into action from a comfortable bedroom, but from the makeshift and narrow tent, where every kind of hardness and severity and unpleasantness is to be found’ (J. Stott, *Guard the Gospel*, p. 53). Paul is hinting that other people will have a lot more free time than a follower of Jesus to do whatever they please, but a Christian will view their time on earth with more of the mindset British people had during World War Two when the expression ‘there’s a war going on’ was raised prior to mentioning all kinds of austerity measures, requests for self-denial or abstention from some form of peacetime pleasures (Stott, p.53). The success of movements where members have had such self-discipline has been impressive over the centuries. Chairman Mao, the Chinese Communist leader, persuaded several million of his followers to risk their lives in the aid of the cause. The Long March between 1934 and 1936 that began with 101,000 people had reduced to 4,000 by the time they reached their northern China destination. Yet by 1949 from that small group China was conquered [information from several internet sources]. We cannot deny the dedication of the Islamist militants who travel around the world on their murderous missions –despite raising serious questions about both the morality as well as the legitimacy of their cause. Surely we can dedicate our lives to a higher and more noble cause?

Where does that leave us as Christians? Are we expected to live an ascetic life like Tertullian? No! Paul had warned Timothy in his earlier surviving letter to this young pastor that all kinds of extremes would surface in the Christian community, but must be rejected. He wrote in I Timothy 4: 3-5, 8 this advice: [some...] *forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth.* ⁴ *For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving,* ⁵ *because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer...* *For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things...* Later on Paul wrote in that letter: *Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment* (I Timothy 6:17). Paul is not rejecting people enjoying art and music, sport and other forms of culture. What he is saying, by contrast, is that we make good use of our time in the choices we make, not making a virtue out of inappropriate self-denial nor being self-indulgent in our behaviour. It is salutary to remind ourselves that the majority of the population contribute virtually nothing in voluntary service or regular charitable giving. As a

result the contribution Christians make in this country in social ministries such as food banks, CAP, youth and children's work, care homes for the elderly etc is far greater than any other agency outside of Government provision. The apostle is calling us to live by our convictions and to stand for them with integrity. A few years ago I participated in a silent vigil in the city centre of Dundee hosted by the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child. Most of the time passed without much apparently happening -until a group of members of the Socialist Workers Party came over to see what our stance was about. They had completed their own public event somewhere else in the city centre and were on their way home. Initial comments led to an opportunity for two of our group and most of them to spend up to thirty minutes in respectful conversations about our particular convictions. It was clear that we had profoundly different stances on a range of topics. However, a remark by one of their number around which we all agreed was that there are few people today who are willing to take a stance for their convictions. He indicated that although holding a different point of view on the abortion debate he respected the manner in which our position was being presented that evening. Our constructive conversations allowed a mutual degree of respect to emerge despite our philosophical and religious differences. Our calling as Christians is to stand firm for our Lord like disciplined soldiers. Peter expressed it so well when he wrote these words in I Peter 3:15: *But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...*

3. The Disciple as law-abiding athlete (II Timothy 2:5)

⁵ Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules. The apostle now turns to a second image that of an athlete competing in the Isthmian or some other form of Greek games. These public spectacles drew large crowds who came to observe athletic competitions in a number of events. Although much smaller in extent than the modern Olympic Games the rules and competitions were in many respects similar to their modern counterparts. All competitors had to obey the strict rules of the competition and only the winner received a reward- a laurel wreath- not the medals of the modern era. Lengthy periods of training lay behind every victor's triumph. The degree of self-discipline required to be a winner was enormous. Paul drew attention to this point in I Corinthians 9:24-27 where he compared a sports' person's dedication to that required of a follower of Jesus. *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.*²⁵ *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever.*²⁶ *Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.*²⁷ *No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.* Likewise in Hebrews 12:1-2 the author makes a similar point: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,*² *fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.* Yet this is not an individual race but a team race in which we encourage one another to finish our race to the best of our ability. We do so likewise in a manner which is both fair and legal with respect to God's law. In our modern society, despite all the weakening of support for traditional morality there is still a strong sense of repulsion against athletes who take drugs or find other ways to gain illegal advantages over their opponents. Such a person who would cheat and break the rules then and now risks public humiliation for their actions when they are found out. At the time of writing this message a top sprinter [Veronica Campbell-Brown of Jamaica June 2013] who has won a number of Olympic medals tested

positive for a banned substance used as a masking agent for more serious performance-enhancing drugs. Her reputation seriously called into question. Paul later in this letter to Timothy will write: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store 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 longed for His appearing* (II Timothy 4:7-8). What a wonderful statement to make. Dr Ivor Oakley, the former Principal of the Scottish Baptist College, in his sermon at my ordination service took this as his theme of ‘finishing well’. His point was that many men begin well in pastoral ministry, but how few were still in pastoral ministry a few decades later when it was approaching their time for retirement from a full-time charge in pastoral ministry. The challenge for us all as Christian disciples is not starting well, but keeping honouring Christ, to the best of our ability, to the end of our days.

4. **The Disciple as a hardworking farmer** (II Timothy 2:6)

⁶*The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.* Paul uses a third metaphor to illustrate what it means to be a Christian disciple in II Timothy 1-7; he has emphasised the quality of endurance required to be a Christian soldier, together with a call to live by God’s moral boundaries as a Christian athlete, before now highlighting the requirement of working hard as a Christian farmer. In this vocation, because it is a lifestyle not a job, there is no danger like that faced by a soldier and or glamour as experienced by a successful athlete. It is a way of life deeply affected by the weather; it is a routine that carries on in co-operation with the cycles of nature and before the arrival of mechanical equipment to lighten some of the load it was incredibly hard physical work. Paul has in mind arable farming which without the sprays and disease treatments available in recent decades could be incredibly productive one year and a total disaster the next. Just to mention the nineteenth century potato famines in Ireland and to a lesser extent the Western Highlands of Scotland of that era recalls the acute heartache of famine and the huge loss of life that can follow in its wake. It is clear that a farmer who had prepared his soil, planted his seed and cultivated his crop was entitled to his share of a good harvest. As the son of a small dairy and sheep farmer in the Lune Valley of Lancashire I know how hard my dad worked. Up at the crack of dawn every day whatever the weather and only stopping well into the evening five days of the week; the exception being Wednesday for the prayer and Bible study meeting at church that we attended as a family and of course Sundays where the minimum work was done to allow us to attend the services at our local village Baptist church. In lambing time –six to eight weeks of the year he got by on four hours of sleep at the most because constant checks on the vulnerable sheep and lambs were required. The rest of the family also joined in every available hour at the busiest times of the year.

What kind of harvest was Paul thinking of for the follower of Jesus? Undoubtedly he had in mind the need *to live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature* (Galatians 5:16), but investing personally and spiritually in the cultivation of our inner nature would lead to the evidence of *the fruit of the Spirit [which] is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,* ²³*gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.* ²⁴*Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.* ²⁵*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit* (Galatians 5:22-25). In his spiritual classic, *Holiness*, the late nineteenth century Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, J.C. Ryle, wrote: I will never shrink from declaring my belief that there are no ‘spiritual gains without pains’. I should as soon expect a farmer to prosper in business who contented himself with sowing his fields and never looking at them till harvest, as expect a believer to attain much holiness who was not diligent about his Bible-reading, his prayers and the use of his Sundays. Our God is a God who works by means, and He will never bless the soul of that man

who pretends to be so high and spiritual that he can get on without them [J.C. Ryle, Holiness, p. 21.] Gospel opportunities have to be taken when they arise. Jesus told His disciples in John 4:34-38: *My food,' said Jesus, 'is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work.* ³⁵ *Don't you have a saying, "It's still four months until harvest"? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.* ³⁶ ***Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.*** ³⁷ *Thus the saying "One sows and another reaps" is true.* ³⁸ *I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour.* The follower of Jesus must be on the look out for opportunities to extend His kingdom and gain spiritual fruit. We have to be pro-active despite our limited resources. Luke (in Luke 10:1-2) recorded these words: *After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of Him to every town and place where He was about to go.* ² *He told them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field.* There will always be fewer workers available than ideally would be required, but against the odds God's people succeed in Jesus' name. Paul described the calling of a disciple of Jesus in this way in II Corinthians 6:3-10: *We put no stumbling-block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.* ⁴ *Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses;* ⁵ *in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger;* ⁶ *in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love;* ⁷ *in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left;* ⁸ *through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors;* ⁹ *known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed;* ¹⁰ *sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.* The enduring spiritual harvest will only be reaped by those who give God their best year after year, in partnership with other disciples of Jesus who are likewise passionate about His priorities for mission and evangelism.

5. **The Disciple as a reflective learner** (II Timothy 2:7)

Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this. At the very end of a message that promotes Christian activism, for which Evangelicals are renowned, Paul concludes on a different note – a call for meditation and reflection. At the heart of the Gospel is a call to be Christ-like in character ahead of doing what Jesus would have us do in our conduct. It is no contradiction of his message, rather a reminder that how we carry out our calling with Christ-like humility and grace will enhance the Gospel we commend by our conduct. It is that extra quality that attracts people to our parent and toddler group or that something extra that people comment on as visitors quite often after Sunday services. May God help us consistently to follow the apostle's advice, for Jesus' sake, Amen.