

## 2 Timothy 2:1-13

Last week we looked at Paul's initial words to Timothy. Timothy, it seems, was struggling with his task of leading the church. Paul's advice was threefold – fan into flames the gift given to you, don't be ashamed of suffering and keep the pattern of sound teaching.

In this next section, Paul continues with his advice adding – be focused and persevere.

Paul starts with next chapter with these words, "You then, my son". It might seem that Paul is on occasions a little harsh with Timothy, and I can imagine that Paul would have been a hard act to follow. But these are real words of affection. Even if Timothy doesn't have faith and confidence in himself, Paul has confidence in Timothy. This isn't anything to do with who Timothy was in and of himself, but rather because Paul recognised the work of Jesus within Timothy – "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" he continues.

This strength from Christ will then enable Timothy to do two other things: persevere and be focused.

Paul throws in three quick illustrations – a soldier, an athlete and a farmer.

Most of the time, people don't sign up for the army to get a shiny uniform. If they did, they'd be in for a bit of a shock! They understand the dangers that they will face and the hardships they will have to endure. What a soldier can't do is get side tracked from their training. There's no point being a soldier if, instead of doing sword drill you instead go and painting pretty pictures! The life of a soldier requires focus because without that focus on training they would put themselves and others in danger. Equally, in the heat of battle, a soldier can't suddenly say to his enemy, "hold on, I just need to go and do some gardening, I'll be back in a few minutes." In the heat of battle, the soldier must persevere until the end.

Then there's the athlete. I'm not much of an athlete, but my nephew is. There's a little app on a phone called Strava and you can use it to record runs, walks and cycle rides – how far you've gone, how fast you've been and stuff like that. And then you can share this information with others. So I can see how many times my nephew has been out running and how far. I can see the dedication and focus that requires. Training as an athlete requires perseverance. We've all probably heard the stories of those who have cheated and bent the rules. The marathon runner who decided to catch a taxi half way through a race, the sprinter he took drugs. You don't get the medals if you don't stick to the rules. Since my nephew left school, he's been thinking about what to do next and whilst he thinks he got himself a job at a coffee shop. For him, yes, it brings in money, but there's that frustration that the coffee shop work takes away valuable training time. It stops him being focused. In September he's off to University. You might think the study would be a distraction to his training (or the other way around!) but because he's quite good at running, he gets to stay in the elite athlete accommodation and so they will help him to be focused in the right ways.

Finally, we have the farmer. A hard-working farmer deserves his crops. The early mornings, the long hours, the hard physical work. And it's not just over a weekend, it's a whole year job. You can't just take holidays whenever you feel like it. You can't decide that today you fancy a day off. To get the fields ploughed, the crops sown, the plants watered and the crop harvested needs a focus on what the crops are doing and what the weather is doing. It requires perseverance to keep going and striving to the end knowing that next year you're going to have to do it all over again. Take your eye off the ball and it will all go horribly wrong!

Perseverance and focus.

So what do these mean for Timothy?

Firstly, as we looked at last week and as Paul reiterates now, being a leader in the church will bring hardship. The soldier illustration is a reminder that we are opposed as Christians. We live in a physical world but there is also a spiritual dimension to it. Whenever people try to proclaim Jesus, there will be that spiritual kickback. The only way that a battle is won is by soldiers keeping on going and not running from the fight. Timothy needs to persevere.

And that perseverance is helped by being focused. Timothy has a task to do that he mustn't get side-tracked away from. Paul says in verse 2, "the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." That is Timothy's prime task. I've no doubt that there were different voices in Timothy's ear encouraging him to do other things and trying to persuade him that other tasks were of equal or greater importance. Timothy was to ignore these voices and stay focused on the task he had been given.

It reminds me of a vicar I knew in Bristol when I was at college. When he arrived in his parish, there were certain people who tried to impress on him the importance of various committees. They are essential, they said to him. He looked at what they were and he said, no, they are not what I am called to do. No matter how important they seemed in other people's eyes, they would have drawn his focus away from what he was called to do.

There is wisdom there for us as well. What is it God has called us to do and are we doing it? Have we got our focus in the right direction and are we persevering with it?

The bottom line for the whole church is that our focus should be on Jesus and making him known in the world. As others have passed the faith onto us, so we need to pass it to others. It is easy to get side-tracked as a church, it's easy for the church to become a cosy club like any other or to get distracted by the worries of the world. But as Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Our focus should be on Jesus and he is the one that will help us to persevere and so receive the victor's crown.