

Text: 2 Timothy 2:1-9

Title: "Good soldiers of Jesus Christ"

Time: 5/30/2021 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: The deaths of soldiers mark some of the most horrific and yet sacred events of American History. It was the Civil War which gave impetus to the celebration of Memorial Day, a time when we remember those who gave their lives that we might live with the freedoms we enjoy in America. The first Memorial Day celebration was held on May 30, 1868, a day when Americans from North and South united to put flowers on the graves of Confederate and Union soldiers and to remember those who had died.

War usually involves tragedy. It is a byproduct of the sinful condition of man. But two testimonies, one of Scripture and one of the history of our land, remind us that soldiers are honorable. The first Memorial Day followed that famous time of remembering the fallen at Gettysburg five years prior, in Abraham Lincoln's "Address." Lincoln was brief and to the point, and with words now etched in history, he explained why it is that the soldier is honorable, in spite of the fact that war is horrible. Lincoln taught us that soldiers are men who "give the last full measure of devotion" that others might experience "a new birth of freedom."

Men who die on battlefields typify much of what we see in the Lord Jesus. He is God's Son who gave "the last full measure of devotion" to provide enslaved sinners "a new birth of freedom" from sin. In this sense, Jesus died the death of a soldier, and we who seek to follow Him must see how our lives must be lived like the lives of soldiers. Our theme this morning is "Good soldiers of Jesus Christ." We soldiers must know three things about our battles.

I. Fighting spiritual battles is hard, not easy (vv. 1, 3-6).

Illustration: Some have joined the military with no expectation of ever having to fight a battle. When soldiers were deployed in 1990 to the Gulf War in Operation Desert Storm, I remember seeing news reports about some who had joined the military for the career and educational opportunities afforded them. Having grown up in a time of relative peace, some were surprised by the call to the battlefield.

One of the reasons for that surprise was that the recruiting advertisements used then by the military often failed to mention the battlefield. Back then, ads spoke of seeing the world, or learning cutting-edge technology, or earning funds for college, not of fighting for your country.

Paul gives it straight to Timothy. In this passage, the Lord tells us that being a good soldier of Jesus Christ is going to be difficult, and he tells us why.

1. Persecution (vv. 3, 9).

Illustration: This is a message I last preached seven years ago in 2014. As I prepared to do so this week, I found this line in my notes from 2014: "Imagine a world in which it was illegal for us to gather as believers for prayer meeting on Wednesday evenings. If we lived in a world like that, if it were illegal to be here together, would we still find a way to obey the Lord and assemble?"

Application: Say what we want about the importance of public health, the fact remains that we no longer have to use our imaginations to experience what it is like for it to be illegal for local churches to assemble in our nation. We now know what that is like from personal experience.

Two weeks ago, we sought to obey 1 Timothy 2 and pray for our civil servants and leaders. We asked some for specific prayer requests. One of our state representatives, Keith Ammon, asked that we pray specifically for the passage of New Hampshire House Bill #542. It says in part:

“If not checked, governments may trample on religious exercise by crafting generally applicable laws which do not explicitly target a religion or religious activity. The fact that a law is generally applicable does not mean that it complies with the federal or state free exercise clauses. As the United States Supreme Court has said, the ‘constitutional rights of those spreading their religious beliefs through the spoken and printed word are not to be gauged by standards governing retailers or wholesalers of books.’ *Murdock v. Com. of Pennsylvania* . . . (1943).”

The bill provides a remedy to the experience churches have had with emergency orders in our state as follows: “To guarantee the free exercise of religion and right of the people to peaceably assemble, as required by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution and Part I, Article 5 of the New Hampshire constitution, any powers activated pursuant to a state of emergency shall not prohibit in-person gatherings at established houses of worship, such as churches, monasteries, mosques, shrines, synagogues, or temples, or temporary places of worship, such as a home bible study or other religious worship or study group or venue” [legiscan.com/NH/text/HB542/id/2238431].

The free exercise of our religion to assemble for worshipping Christ in obedience to the commands of Scripture has been harder for us over the past year than in previous years. As good soldiers of Jesus Christ, we should not be surprised at the need to face the difficulty of persecution.

2. Sacrifice (v. 4).

Illustration: The Hobi family has had some fine dogs in its day, and we also had Shannon. Shannon was a mutt of a dog that was the size of a terrier, had hair which grew as long as a sheep dog, and she must have had some poodle in her too because she never shed. Shannon's hair was always a mess. She would develop huge mats and get embedded burrs in her coat, which were impossible to get out. Giving Shannon a bath was an impossible task which took hours and was never fully successful. The only way to deal with her condition was to completely shave her once a year.

Application: The Greeks would have used this word *entangled* in verse 4 to describe those burrs caught in Shannon's black hair. It is used in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, a favorite devotional book of the early church, to describe a sheep that had gotten thorns caught in its wool.

A good soldier of Jesus Christ will avoid getting entangled in the affairs of this life. The word translated *affairs of this life* means simply daily undertakings, business affairs, the kids' recreational activities, for example. The Lord Jesus named three thorns of entanglement in His parable of the sower. The seed which fell among thorns was choked out by the worries, riches, and pleasures of this life (Lk. 8:14).

Paul's point about entanglements here is that no private on the battlefield tells his sergeant, "You know what Serge, I've had it with this battle for a while, and I am going to go fishing for a month and take a little break." No soldier says, "Sir, I have just been away from my family too long, so I'm going home." There is nothing wrong with fishing, and there is nothing wrong with spending time with your family, but when these things weaken our fight in the battle, even these good things become dangerously disastrous.

3. Obedience (v. 5).

Illustration: Did you hear about the 18-year-old who got tired of being bossed around by his mom and dad so he decided to join the Marines? We all know that is not a well thought-out plan. If you do not want to follow some rules, you should not join the Marines. Soldiers learn to obey.

Application: Following Paul's analogy of the athlete in our passage, every athlete competing successfully in any game has to understand that he must follow the rules and that it does not matter whether or not he agrees with the rules. They are the rules of the game, and they must be followed.

I am thankful for our church's covenant in this regard, because it reminds us of some of the important rules of the battlefield of the spiritual warfare we are called to fight. Let's not try to do this without proper attention to the rules simply because it is easier to ignore them. The covenantal responsibilities of church membership are biblical, and they are important for spiritual victory on the battlefield today.

4. Work (v. 6).

Illustration: Kevin Anderson made me thankful that I have never had to distribute 300 pigs to pig customers. That was a lot of work. Kevin said he slept very well that night.

Application: Farmers know what it is to work hard. Paul is saying that the cause of Christ deserves this kind of diligent commitment. The work and mission of the church is not just a leisurely Sunday morning event. Winning spiritual battles in the lives of people is hard work that keeps us busy daily. Perhaps we have reaped a very small harvest because we have not worked hard in the field.

Illustration: Horatius Bonar, *Words to the Winner of Souls*:

“Tis not for man to trifle. Life is brief,
And sin is here.
Our age is but the falling of a leaf –
A dropping tear.
We have no time to sport away the hours.
All must be earnest in a world like ours.

“Not many lives, but only one have we –
One, only one.
How sacred should that one life ever be –
That narrow span!
Day after day filled up with blessed toil,
Hour after hour still bringing in new spoil.”

Persecution, sacrifice, obedience, and work are difficulties that must be faced by good soldiers of Jesus Christ. Fighting spiritual battles is hard, not easy.

II. Fighting spiritual battles is for armies, not isolated soldiers (vv. 2-3).

Note: The word translated *endure hardship* in our KJV Bibles is translated *suffer with* in newer translations. It is a word that means *to suffer together with someone*. So the command in v. 3 is not only to suffer hardship, but also to do it side by side with someone else. The KJV translation of this word in 1:8 brings out this nuance of the word nicely: *Be thou partaker of the afflictions*.

Application: Paul understood that fighting on the battlefield can be a lonely task. Latter in the letter we learn why this is such an important emphasis to Paul at this time (2 Tim. 4:9-16). Paul needed the encouragement of others.

Not everyone was qualified to meet this need. Only those who were faithful were qualified (v. 2). Faithful men teaching other faithful men to do the same is the battle plan of good soldiers. We are an army. We must fight together, not go it alone.

III. Fighting spiritual battles must be done with God's ability, not our own (v. 1, 7-9).

Application: These verses mention two ways to draw on God's ability rather than our own in spiritual battle.

1. Grace is a way to draw on God's ability (v. 1). In summary, God's grace is simply the sum of all the free gifts we receive from Him, none of which we deserve. When Paul says to be strong in this grace, I believe he means that we are spiritually strong to the degree that we see how blessed we are and how little we deserve to be so blessed. This thankfulness for God's grace is our source of spiritual strength, and at the very center of God's gracious gifts is the free gift of His Son (v. 8). We are strong when we see Him and remember what He has done for us. We are terribly weakened when we begin to think that we deserve better than what we are experiencing from the hand of God.

2. God's Word is a way to draw on God's ability (vv. 7, 9). One of Satan's primary goals in spiritual battle is to get us to rely on our own battle plans. His weapon is the lie. As our defense, believers have both an unlimited invitation, and an unlimited power. The invitation to consider God's Word is unlimited (v. 7, "in all things"). Because Paul was inspired when he said, "Consider what I say," we can hear God saying, "Consider what I say through Paul." Your God invites you to understand what He says. That universal understanding is a free gift to those who are willing to listen.

Also, the power of God's Word is unlimited (v. 9). Paul could be stopped, but God's Word could not be. You can deny the relevance of the messenger this morning, but you cannot deny the relevance of the message. God's Word is not bound – it binds. May we find strength for our battles in the Word of God that cannot be bound.

Conclusion: Have you and I been good soldiers of Jesus Christ? When it comes to the work of the gospel through our local church, have we endured persecutions, sacrifices, obedience to the rules, and hard work? Are we committed to do so together and by the grace of God and the word of His power?

Or are we to be numbered with those whose goal is to be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease? Let's ask ourselves that question prayerfully as we sing our closing hymn, "Am I a Soldier of the Cross?"

"A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction – the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching