

October 9, 2022 – 2 Timothy 2:1-13

Did you know that during WWII, there was a single invention that probably saved the lives of hundreds or even thousands of soldiers? But it wasn't a weapon. It wasn't a piece medical technology. It wasn't a new plane or ship or vehicle. No, the invention I'm referring to was an electric tea kettle.

You see, during the war, British tank crews operating in Europe would often find themselves on the battlefield during tea time. And seeing as how you couldn't build a fire to boil water for tea inside a tank, they would exit their tanks to do so.

German soldiers soon discovered this pattern of behavior. They would sneak up on British tanks and wait until late-afternoon to launch their attack. Catching all of the crews outside the safety of their armored vehicle as they drank their afternoon tea.

The British came up with a solution. They didn't order their tank crews to forego tea time. That was unthinkable. A fate worse than death, apparently. No, instead, they invented an electric tea kettle that could be used inside the tanks. Allowing them to enjoy their tea while still protected by their tank's armor. And likely saving many lives.

Tea time is a luxury of civilian life. One that those British soldier had trouble setting aside for the sake of their combat readiness. Their inability to stay focused and disciplined, to stay inside the protection of their tank, put them in a dangerous place.

St Paul in our Epistle lesson today compares being a Christian to being a soldier on the battlefield. “*No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.*” Essentially, being a soldier means adopting a very different way of life. It means staying focused and disciplined on the task you've been given by your commanding officer. And not distracted by the luxuries that civilians have the freedom to pursuit.

The same is true of the other examples he gives. Athletes must stay focused and disciplined on the sport they are playing. If they get distracted, they'll end up breaking the rules and getting disqualified. Even the best athlete can lose if he doesn't pay attention to what he's doing and follow the rules.

And farmers... we have some hard working farmers in this room right now. Farmers in the midst of one of the busiest times of the year. This is not a time to become lazy and distracted. You have to stay focused. You have to stay disciplined. The harvest is almost in. But you won't have anything at all to show for your work if you don't get through these last few days.

Being a Christian is like being a soldier, like being an athlete, like being a farmer. It takes focus and discipline. Or else it all falls apart.

Because the enemy is always watching. Watching for you to let your guard down and step out from behind your armor. Watching for you to become distracted by temptation and accuse you of breaking God's Law. Watching for you to become tired and lazy and forget the task at hand.

So we must remain focused... but focused on what? Well, first and foremost, on Jesus. That's Paul's first and clearest instruction: Remember Jesus Christ. Which seems obvious. And yet, it still needs to be said.

I mean, after all, who would have thought that a soldier would have to be told, “Stay in your tank,” and yet, they did. Who would have thought an athlete would have to be told, “Follow the rules,” and yet anybody who's ever watched an NFL game knows that they are filled with penalty flags. Who would have thought a farmer would have to be told, “Work hard,” and yet farmers go bankrupt all the time, purely as a result of their own laziness.

So I'll say to you what Paul says to Timothy: Remember Jesus Christ. Everything we do, everything we say, everything we believe finds it's root and foundation in Jesus. He is the center of Scripture, to whom all the prophets point forward and all the apostles point backward. There is no Christian faith without Jesus Christ.

So we remember Jesus Christ. But who is Jesus? If you don't have a firm understanding of who Jesus is, then we're just focusing on a name, not a person.

And so Paul tells us that we remember Jesus as the one who rose from the dead. The resurrection is the focal point of most of Paul's preaching, and for one simple reason: it validates everything that Jesus ever said or did.

You see, without the resurrection, the Gospels are, quite frankly, meaningless. Yes, Jesus did miracles, but the Bible is full of men who did miracles. Moses did miracles. Elijah did miracles. Elisha did miracles. Isaiah did miracles. Certainly, these were all important prophets. But none of them were the Christ. None of them had the power to forgive sins. None of them were the Son of God.

The resurrection defines Jesus as the one who is Christ and Savior and God made flesh. That is our focal point. And yet, he is also a man. The offspring of David, Paul calls him. One who stands as the second Adam, who resists the devil's temptations. As the greater David, who sits on the throne of an eternal kingdom. As the suffering servant of Isaiah's prophecies, who has the iniquity of us all laid upon him and dies the death we deserve.

So Paul is telling us that our focal point as Christians is on the God-man Jesus Christ. And by keeping his focus on the God-man Jesus Christ, Paul has endured all sorts of suffering. More suffering than a soldier, than an athlete, or even a hard working farmer.

Because even though Paul is himself bound in chains, the Word of God is not bound. The Word of God is never bound. Just as we focus on our task of remembering the God-man Jesus Christ, God is focused on his task of saving the elect.

Of bringing the Word through sin, suffering, and persecution to every corner of the world. That all may know and believe the salvation that is in Jesus Christ. That is God's focus. And he does not waver from that task. Just as Christ was perfectly disciplined in going to the cross for our sake, so he is still perfectly disciplined in bringing the good news of his salvation to all those he has called to be his own.

It is a perfect focus and perfect discipline that we do not come close to having. And at first glance, that may be worrying. Paul gives us here what many Biblical scholars believe is actually an ancient Christian hymn:

*"If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful."*

The beginning of this hymn is, as I said, a little troubling. If we have died with him, we will live with him. But what if we haven't died with him? If we endure, we will also reign with him. But what if we haven't endured? If we deny him, he also will deny us. But what if there was a moment in my life when I did deny him? When I became scared? When I gave into temptation? When I crumbled under the pressure? Is there no hope for me now?

Paul calls on us to be focused and disciplined. Focused and disciplined to a perfect degree. Never wavering. Never distracted. Never letting our guard down.

But that isn't what sinful human beings are like. We are soldiers who occasionally do foolish things like have tea time in the middle of a battlefield. We are not perfect.

But he is. For if we are faithless, he remains faithful. If we lose focus on him, he does not lose focus on us. If we forget about him, he does not forget about us. If we grow lazy and complacent about being his disciple, he remains our Lord.

As Paul says, he cannot deny himself. We are part of the body of Christ. We are temples of the Holy Spirit. We are not just in the kingdom of God. We are the kingdom of God. And that doesn't change just because we took our eyes off the prize for a moment.

Paul begins this passage with a wonderful promise to Timothy: *"You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus."* As Christians we need to have focus and discipline in the work of God's kingdom. But those are not our strength.

Our strength is the grace of God. The grace that says, "You are my child. And even though you sin, you will remain my child. For though you were faithless, I am faithful, and I always will be." Amen.