

## Olympic-Level Spiritual Commitment (2 Timothy 2, Titus 2)

*Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on July 13, 2008*

Titus 2:1-7 (NASB95) <sup>1</sup> But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine. <sup>2</sup> Older men are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance. <sup>3</sup> Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, <sup>4</sup> so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, <sup>5</sup> *to be* sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored. <sup>6</sup> Likewise urge the young men to be sensible; <sup>7</sup> in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, *with* purity in doctrine, dignified,

This is not a passage to rush through in one message, in fact I really just wanted to introduce the first portion of this chapter today and I won't even be jumping into the details of the various exhortations Paul gives to each of the various groups in the church, which I will seek to expound more beginning next week. But I want you to turn today back a few pages to a parallel passage in 2 Timothy 2 and try to give a broader context of how this fits into Paul's overall exhortations in his letters to Titus and Timothy, these so-called "pastoral epistles" written to these young pastors serving in ministry, Paul's sons in the faith. As a young pastor myself, I think you can understand why I am drawn to these letters, which complement each other and together give the church the essential tasks and truths it needs to know God's blessing.

The beginning of Titus 2 really highlights the inter-generational aspect of ministry – the older teaching the younger, both men and women, and the passing on of truth from one generation to the next. Titus was told to instruct the young men in specific areas and to be an example, and the older women are to model and teach God's truth to the younger women, and the older men are similarly to model godliness and mentor younger men in the faith, and the goal is that the younger can eventually mentor or disciple others.

2 Timothy 2 in some ways covers the same critical subject:

2 Timothy 2:1-2 (NASB95) <sup>1</sup> You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

This context speaks especially of men in ministry, but the principle would apply to all ministries of the church. We are called to make disciples, and we seek to make them reproducing *disciple-makers*, and those they disciple will be reproducing others like them. As this verse says, Paul did not disciple Timothy for his own benefit and growth only, but the things Timothy heard from Paul he is to also entrust these to others with the final goal that they will be able to do the same, so that ministry is a relay race, rather than an individual running.

The athletic imagery is one of many that Paul uses to highlight the commitment-level and diligent hard work God expects of all of us.

<sup>3</sup> Suffer hardship with *me*, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. <sup>4</sup> No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier. <sup>5</sup> Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules. <sup>6</sup> The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops.

... <sup>15</sup> Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

Verse 15 is the theme verse of AWANA from this text (Approved Workman Are Not Ashamed)

If God has a vital role and commitment for all of us in the church, young and old, men and women, adults and children - and He does - perhaps it would serve us before we look at the specifics that God calls us to, to look at *how we are going to be able to fulfill such a commitment*. And I believe 2 Timothy 2 gives us the means by which we can fulfill the vital tasks Paul calls us to in Titus 2 and in living the Christian life.

We've looked at the soldier image last month, but I want to look especially at v. 15 today and the athletic imagery we see in v. 5.

We're less than a month away from this summer's Olympic games and I thought it a fitting time to be reminded of this image of commitment and diligence that will be freshly visible. The Olympics began in Greece in 776 BC and continued until AD 393. The Olympics were well-known to the original readers of the NT as the pinnacle of human diligence and hard work in the physical realm. Verse 5 mentions some rules, and there were a number:

- the contestants had to be born as Greeks
- they had to train intensely for ten months
- they had to be denying self
- they had to swear allegiance to their emperor.

Timothy lived in the city of Ephesus, the most important city in Asia Minor, which had a massive stadium that could hold an estimated 25,000 people and hosted athletic events that rivaled the Olympics in Greece. The Olympics began over 2800 years ago and continued every four years for more than a millennium and then were revived in more modern times.

Paul draws on the imagery of these games in 2 Timothy 2 and other passages – the difference is in the Christian race:

- you don't have to be born a Greek, but you do have to be *born again*
- your allegiance is not to the Emperor but to God alone
- the diligence and hard work is not physical but is just as intense spiritually
- dying to self is still a requirement.

2 Tim 2:5 says: *If anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win unless he competes according to the rules*" (true in our day as well – athletes disqualified because of steroids, etc.)

Paul continues this sports imagery at the end of his letter and life in 4:7 – *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course / race, I have kept the faith."* Verse 8 speaks of the victor's heavenly crown which is not like the perishable wreath worn by earthly Olympic victors. Paul is urging Timothy to Olympic-level spiritual commitment: to stay on track, to stay in bounds, to follow the rules laid down by the Master, to fight the good fight of faith, and finish the course and race God has for him.

Everybody in the first century knew about the games, it was the highest example of physical effort and Paul frequently used it by analogy to raise the bar spiritually as high as possible. Paul's argument has been summarized this way:

*He said in effect, "The games are played at this level of reality. They run at this level. They box at this level. They train and practice and deny themselves at this level. They set their sights on gold at this level. "Now I want you to see all that at another level. I want you to transpose the temporary struggles and triumphs of the Olympic Games onto a different level of reality--the level of spiritual life and eternity and God. When you see the athletes run, see another kind of running. When you see them boxing, see another kind of boxing. When you see them training and denying themselves, see another kind of training and self-denial. When you see them smiling with a gold medal around their neck, see another kind of prize." ... [To Paul] the games ... are meant to be seen and heard by Christians as a tremendous impulse to fight the fight of faith and run the race of life with nothing less than Olympic passion and perseverance.<sup>1</sup>*

2 Timothy is Paul's passing the torch to Timothy – he's finished his lap and passing on the baton of truth to Timothy and urging Timothy to pass it on to others. To bring in the language of other epistles, he's essentially saying Timothy, don't give up, don't worry about your opponents, don't worry about the crowd, just run with endurance throwing off the sins that so easily entangle you, forget about the past, and press on to the things ahead, keep your eyes on the prize so that you can fight the good fight, keep the faith and finish your race!

In chapter 2:3-4 Paul tells Timothy he must also be a good soldier, suffering hardship, Timothy, be a warrior freeing yourself from worldly distractions so you can focus on pleasing the commander in chief. There are no draft dodgers in the Lord's army, no deserters allowed, no defectors, no reserve forces Christians, no undercover believers, no leave of absences, Timothy, you're deployed in this war and you need to be strong in the trenches!

In verse 6 he uses yet another picture: he tells Timothy to be like a hard-working farmer, patient and tireless in his toil. That's a great image of the Christian life, patiently, faithfully working in service for the Lord, day-by-day, hour-by-hour, focused on God and the future outcome. This is the final letter Paul would ever write in scripture and he's pulling out all the metaphors, not holding anything back. He gives 25 commands in these brief chapters. The reason is, as 3:1 says "*difficult times will come*"

The key question is HOW CAN A MAN OR WOMAN OF GOD PERSEVERE IN DIFFICULT TIMES? The answer has to do with how much we LOVE and LIVE God's Word. My goal is to help us see and this monumental charge Paul gave Timothy, so that YOU can also be an unashamed workman, warrior, and spiritual athlete, with the commitment God desires.

#### OUTLINE:

1. Be Diligent in the things of God
2. Be God-Focused (zealous for the approval of God)
3. Be Faithful to the word of God

#### BE DILIGENT

Since I began studying this passage before the first time I ever preached before a large group, these 2 words have challenged me perhaps more than any 2 words in the Bible.

In the Greek language it's one word and one of the strongest possible in their vocabulary to emphasize this type of wholeheartedness and it's a rebuke to any who give less than a full effort in the things of God. The more you understand the force of the word Paul uses here, the more uncomfortable it becomes. When I am tempted to become lazy in my studies or efforts, these words have been haunting me "Be diligent" – when I make excuses about being tired, or I can do it later, Paul keeps convicting me "Be diligent!"

I suspect there are many who started a daily Bible reading program all gung-ho and have fallen behind ... days – weeks, etc. Paul's challenge applies to you as well – Be diligent! Don't give up. If you're in a spiritually dry time, don't give up.

If your prayer life has become cold, if you're not using your gifts in the body, Paul charges Timothy in chapter 1 – "kindle afresh" - fan the flames back up, stay diligent, stoke the fireplace of earnestness in your heart about the things of God, put fuel on the fire!

Maybe you're on another reading program or maybe you've been trying to do memory verses or some other discipline, and you just let yourself become undisciplined – this applies to a lot of areas - Be diligent in the things of God and especially the Word of God.

\*\* EZRA 7:10 – great OT example of diligence in study

Ezra had set his mind / prepared his heart (whole being) to:

1. study (an intense word, lit. SEEK out the full meaning of)
2. to practice it
3. and to teach

\*\*THE ORDER IS CRITICAL

In 2 Tim. 2:15 the KJV has "study to shew thyself" and the word can include study and but is also broader than how we use that word today exclusively for book work. We are to be diligent in the things of God, including (especially) the study of God's Word.

Before Paul tells Timothy to "preach the Word" in chapter 4, he tells him here he must diligently study the word. If Timothy (who knew Greek, lived with Paul, etc.) needed to study, how much more us today? Even the Apostle Peter in 2 Peter 3:6 said there were some things in Paul's writings hard to understand – if Peter was challenged in understanding the writing of his contemporary, how much more do we need to study today?

The Holy Spirit illumines us as we study diligently, and He has also illuminated many other godly men through the years whose writings we shouldn't ignore. Paul's own example in 2 Timothy 4 is compelling – he's on spiritual death row and may not be around much longer, but he wants Timothy to bring more books and parchments so he can study more before He sees God.

READ 4:13. It's not more spiritual to not study and just be "led by the spirit", preaching what's on your heart or whatever comes to mind, shooting from the hip, without studying diligently. Charles Haddon Spurgeon preached a whole sermon on 2 Tim 4:13 where he had some strong words on this matter:

How rebuked are they [who minimize study] by the apostle! He is inspired, and yet he wants books! He has been preaching at least for thirty years [*in fact he could speak direct revelation from God without studying*], and yet he wants books! He had seen the Lord, and yet he wants books! He had had a wider experience than most men, and yet he wants books! He had been caught up into the third heaven, and had heard things which it was unlawful for a man to utter, yet he wants books! He had written the major part of the New Testament, and yet he wants books! ... He who will not use the thoughts of other men's brains, proves that he has no brains of his own. Brethren, what is true of ministers is true of all our people. You need to read. Renounce as much as you will all light literature, but study as much as possible sound theological works, especially the Puritanic writers, and expositions of the Bible. We are quite persuaded that the very best way for you to be spending your leisure, is to be either reading or praying ... Paul cries, "Bring the books" — join in the cry.<sup>2</sup>

Emphasizing study does not minimize the importance of prayer and illumination from God's Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not make study unnecessary, He makes it more effective. Some people think all we need to do is just read a little and pray to let the Holy Spirit teach us rather than lean on the "unspiritual," human work of diligent and careful study.

Someone once said to the scholar Benjamin B. Warfield "ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books."

But the *appropriate* response, Warfield replied is "ten hours over your books, on your knees." Yes, we must pray. Our study will be worthless without God's help. But praying doesn't replace studying, it *revives* it.

It's so easy for the pendulum to swing too far one way or another. We can criticize more emotional Christians for having a zeal but not according to knowledge, but too many of us can be guilty of having knowledge without any zeal, or at least not enough.

The word "Be diligent" in 2 Timothy 2:15 really goes farther than study, it requires zeal and earnestness. In fact the same Greek word is translated in different parts of the NT with phrases like the following:

BE ZEALOUS  
BE EAGER  
STRIVE  
LABOUR  
DO YOUR BEST

The word "Study" in KJV was the old English expression for endeavor, make it your aim, set yourself deliberately to do something. I spent several hours studying this word in the best sources available and the more I learned, the more I realized how much I have to learn about the weight and gravity of the responsibility of sacred study – some scholars translate it as "TAKE ALL PAINS" - sustained effort, "Make this your highest priority," or "Pour yourself into this task." MAKE A MAXIMUM EFFORT! Involve oneself *wholeheartedly*

I mentioned the resolutions of Jonathan Edwards, and here was one – “Resolved to live with all my might as long as I do live”

Jim Elliot – “live to the hilt whatever you believe to be the will of God”

Paul "not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; " (Rom 12.11)

There Paul sheds light on same Greek word “diligence” linking it with fervency

### APATHY IS A TRAGEDY

God’s truth should impact us emotionally

How refreshing it is to see new believers as they learn (I had a very refreshing conversation with a new believer this week that really blessed my soul – someone who is very diligent in studying God’s truth with an insatiable hunger)

To further expand your understanding of this phrase “Be diligent” it may be helpful to see how the same Greek command is used just a couple chapters forward in 2 Timothy 4:21 – “make every effort” NASB, “do your utmost” in NKJV - 4:9 also same word in NASB translated “make every effort” (\*look at context of v. 6-8)

The root word often has the idea of haste or quickness by itself.

The verb tense Paul uses makes it even stronger – the command tense for urgent summary action – TIMOTHY DO IT NOW

Context of 2 Timothy is Paul’s last words

\* like a dying man, the same intensity and urgency I’m telling you these things Timothy, that same earnestness needs to be in you as you pass the truth along to others.

*I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.- BAXTER*

This high goal will require ceaseless, serious, blood-earnest effort.

Paul is telling us not to settle for less than this level of pursuit

### 2. Be God Focused - Zealous for God’s Approval (re-read text)

There is a very well-known story told of a young boy in Austria giving his first violin recital. He had studied hard for years under the guidance of one of the greatest masters in all of Europe. The boy had tremendous talent, and he had learned his lessons well. As he stood on the stage before an audience of hundreds of lovers of good music, he performed with confidence and skill. Following each piece, the crowd cheered loudly. He was one of the finest young performers they had ever had to pleasure of hearing. And yet the boy seemed not to notice their expressions of approval. In fact, some later commented that he almost seemed annoyed by the applause.

At the conclusion of the recital, the entire audience rose as one to give the young performer a standing ovations. They shouted “Bravo” and “Encore!” and other words of praise and appreciation. However, the young musician seemed not even to hear them. Instead, he stood looking up into the balcony where an old, withered man sat looking back down at him. Finally, the old gentleman smiled and nodded his head in approval. Only then did the lad seem to relax, and his face beamed with joy. You see, the cheers of the crowd meant nothing unless he had the approval of the master! It was only the latter that this young performer sought! This is a principle the Apostle Paul understood very well. At Lystra he was hailed as a god, and the people sought to offer up sacrifices to him (Acts 14:11–13). Even to this day, disciples of Christ often refer to this man as “the greatest Christian who has ever lived!” When we realize, as did Paul, that it is the Master whom we serve and seek to please, both the acclaim and criticism of mere men will pale in comparison! “Be diligent to present yourself approved unto God” (2 Tim. 2:15).<sup>3</sup>

“Approved to God” – not approved unto men.

This is important for all of us to make sure our motive is to please God and not man. This was especially important for young pastors like Timothy (or myself or anyone in ministry) because there is a great temptation to want people to like you or your messages.

We live in a day when people are not very interested in “doctrine” or having hard-hitting messages on sin, and the so-called experts tell us what we need to do is change our approach to more upbeat messages, we need research find out what people desire to hear or want they want church to feel like, we need lighter and shorter sermons with lots of jokes or whatever tickles their ear (cf. 4:1-3)

But as I’ve told you before, the solemn charge to a preacher is not to give the people want they want to hear but what they NEED to hear. The goal is not for people to feel good, but to fear God!

- It has been pointed out that Noah’s message from the steps going up to the Ark was not, “Something good is going to happen to you today!”
- Amos was not confronted by the high priest of Israel for proclaiming “your best life now” or “the power of positive thinking”
- Jeremiah was not put into the pit for preaching, “I’m O.K., you’re O.K.!”
- Daniel was not put into the lion’s den for telling people God wants them to be healthy, wealthy, and wise
- John the Baptist was not forced to preach in the wilderness and eventually beheaded because he preached, “Smile, God loves you!”

... God’s love must also be balanced with God’s wrath toward sin, and the message of all these prophets of God was “Repent.” The truth must be spoken in love – to skip the truth is *unloving*.

It’s easy to be tempted to want men’s applause or accolades or approval, but Paul tells Timothy his focus needs to be “to present himself approved TO GOD” (and God alone)

The word “approved” is the word we discussed last week from Titus 1:16. It means authentic, genuine, worthy.

It referred to something or someone tested by some trial or examination and accepted after successfully standing the test.

This process can take *time*. The Greeks used this word to describe the refining of gold through fire. The fire burns off the dross so that only the pure gold remains. Or it was used of the process of making coins from metal, heating it into liquid form, and pouring it into moulds so it will cool. This word was used of men of integrity who would accept no shaved coins or counterfeit money, men of honor who put only genuine full-weighted money into circulation. If we truly present ourselves to God, we can be assured that he will slowly, but surely, burn the dross away. All that remains is the authentic person that God has been fashioning in Christ.

“Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” (James 1:12)

The word “workman” in our verse describes a tireless day laborer working with his hands 12 hours a day, like the man described in verse 6: “the hard working farmer.” It was most often used of an agricultural laborer, a grape-picker, any kind of manual labor.

Literally “one who works for hire”; anyone who works under the direction of another and is subject to the employer’s inspection of his work. The stress is not on the needed skill of the workman but rather on his diligence to assure that his work is approved by his employer. The imagery here is not that of great skill, but of deep integrity. The workman does not need to be ashamed because he’s put in an honest day’s work. This is what God requires of us

When Paul talks about the minister being a laborer, he uses the word for working to the point of exhausting, “to wear yourself out.”

Lastly, Be faithful to the Word of God – “rightly / accurately handling the word of truth”

The KJV “rightly dividing the word” has been mis-interpreted by some strong dispensationalists who get carried away in taking this as the proof text for dividing every Bible verse into a super-imposed system, which in some camps has led them to say the Sermon on the Mount doesn’t apply to Christians today because we’re in a different dispensation, or some say there’s no place for the law or even the Lordship of Christ for salvation and repentance should not be preached as part of the gospel, or that what was taught before the cross doesn’t apply to us, only the NT epistles (a few would say only Paul’s epistles, etc.), and all kinds of wacky errors.

“Rightly dividing” in that sense is not at all what Paul means here – John MacArthur calls that “tritely dividing the word of God.”

**THE WORD HERE REALLY MEANS “CUTTING OR MAKING A STRAIGHT LINE”**

- A carpenter cutting a straight line with a saw
- A mason building, each block must fit perfectly so that foundation is level

- Cutting a road through clearing and uneven terrain to make path (Prov 3:5-6)
- Ploughing a straight line so your field will be fertile and grow
- Cutting a straight line with cloth
- Cutting away everything that is unhelpful or inaccurate
- Calvin the Reformer likened it to father cutting evening meal to pieces for each person, suitable to each
- Cutting animal hides and putting together to make tents – Paul’s occupation

Idea: handle carefully, give accurate instruction—‘to teach correctly, to expound rightly.’

Not what it “means to me” but what God meant through the original writer to the original audience based on the original language and historical, grammatical, contextual interpretation

Paul is saying we must explain, handle, interpret properly this book. He is emphasizing right teaching and/or right living

\*\* PROVERBS 2:1-5 – the intensity of study that God blesses

Not a complacent Bible reading - Desperate pursuit! Piper: “reading & ransacking” (we discussed this at our last men’s study)

My study Bible says “This shows the passionate pleading of one who is desperate to know and apply the truth of God.”

ILLUSTRATION: Many of you are familiar with the story of Martin Luther, the German monk, whose will was in bondage to sin and the sacramental system of Rome, but God sovereignly and mercifully converted him to true faith. I want to read a portion of his testimony written years later, paying special attention to the phrases for diligence and seeking to rightly understand the Word

*I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans [1:17] ... Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience ... Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. [in another place he likened to Moses beating rock till water came] At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." There *I began to understand* [that] the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith ... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Here a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. *Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory ...*<sup>4</sup>*

This was the breakthrough for Luther and this type of study was really what drove the Reformation. I'm not sure if any of us in this room (myself included) fully appreciate the cost and sacrifice and suffering Christians had to go through in the past to get the Word of God into our hands in our language so it could be rightly and accurately understood by common man – Huss, Wycliff, Tyndale, Reformers, etc. Think of the missionaries and martyrs who gave their lives for this book, and we treat it so lightly and lazily!

We have more resources today at our fingertips, that the giants of faith from years ago would have given their arm and leg for, and to whom much is given much is required.

1. Be Diligent in the Things of God
2. Be God-Focused and Zealous for the Approval of God
3. Be Faithful to the Word of God

---

<sup>1</sup> John Piper, "Olympic-Level Spirituality" [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org)

<sup>2</sup> Charles Spurgeon, "Paul – His Cloak and Books," *Metropolitan Tabernacle* 9, #542.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.preceptaustin.org/2\\_timothy\\_commentaries\\_2.htm](http://www.preceptaustin.org/2_timothy_commentaries_2.htm) (verse 15)

<sup>4</sup> Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy : God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2000. (p. 91).