

The soldier, athlete and farmer #1

Hi all,

The woman sat in my office with tears running down her cheeks. Head down, fidgeting with her hands in her lap, she explained her great sadness.

She had been in the audience at church, listening as people got up to tell their testimonies about how they grew up, came to the Lord, and what they wanted to do for Him. With each story she sunk deeper into discouragement because her background was so very different from everyone else's. She didn't feel she had anything to offer the Lord, she couldn't sing nor play an instrument, and was terrified of getting up in front of an audience; she felt all alone while surrounded by many.

She had a rough background growing up. Her mother had different men in her life she brought home from the bars on a regular basis, and most of them beat her. They were poor, and looked down upon and teased by the children in school due to her mother's reputation, her ragged clothing, and where they lived. She and her siblings each had different fathers, and her mother used the welfare system for free money, free food, free utilities and they lived in housing for the poor.

Her mother had no intent on leaving the system or her way of life, and growing up this woman had vowed she would never be like her mother. However, in her teens and twenties to her own self-loathing, she became just like her mother - having a man in her life seemed to be the way out, and then having a baby with him was the way to keep him - she thought. But she was repeating the pattern she realized: Each of her boyfriends beat her, and when each left she found another man. She realized she had become her mother, the very thing she hated and had sworn she would never be.

That is when she went to a new church one day, not within her denomination but an independent, Charismatic church that was having a 'revival'. She gave her heart to the Lord and she felt clean and whole for the first time since she was a young child! That rebirth of her spirit didn't immediately affect her mind of course, so she still thought love was communicated from a man to his woman by him hitting her, abusing her. She had a lot to learn. When she married a good and loving Christian man after only knowing him 3 weeks, she had to relearn love, relationships - everything!

That day I shared with her the story of the soldier, from II Timothy 2:3-4, and it changed the way she thought of herself forever, and started her down the path of wholeness.

Paul wrote to Timothy, whom he had sent to Ephesus to help coordinate the many family based churches that met in homes there. I've seen estimates that of the 250,000 population of Ephesus, as many as 10%, or 25,000 may have been Christians. What we see in our network around the world, and from what we know back then, home based churches continue to range from a few people to maybe 20 or so. That means rotating homes and rotating who led each meeting, there were hundreds if not thousands of homes in the greater metro area of Ephesus in which they met. Young Timothy was sent there to help with it all - a full time job!

Ephesus in that day was a seaport, though since then the bay has silted in and the city now sits 5 miles (8km) from the sea. The city was like any city in our day, full of people of various nationalities and working all kinds of jobs from sailors and dock workers to owners of the ships that sailed into and out of port. I've walked Ephesus and it is beautiful even in ruin, with white marble sidewalks inlaid with amazing frescos of beautiful plants and animals, their sidewalks even covered to protect people from the intense sun!

And as human nature hasn't changed, that Christian population would have included people like the woman sitting in my office. New to the Lord, and with that newness in Him came His intense light showing the depths of former sin. Remember, it was in Ephesus that Acts 19 tells us Paul taught daily in a school (during siesta between 11am and 4pm (16:00)), and so many came to the Lord they made a huge fire of their old books on the occult and witchcraft! (Acts 19:19)

These people had rough backgrounds in the occult, in paganism, in who knows what - and the memories of those former days no doubt made some of them feel as the woman above felt, that they were no not worthy, not capable, of being used of the Lord for any good thing in Him. They had no knowledge of Judaism, of Christianity, of anything to do with the One True God, which explains Paul teaching daily in a school for 2 years. (Acts 19)

Enter the soldier, enter Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus

In Paul's second letter to Timothy in Ephesus, he wrote words encouraging Timothy and for his readers, even to our day:

"...endure hardship, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man who goes to war entangles himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who chose him to be a soldier. And if a person strives for athletic mastery, he isn't crowned unless he do so according to the rules. The farmer who works so hard must also be the first partaker of what he has grown. Consider what I say, and the Lord will give you understanding..."

Paul told Timothy to 'consider' and 'the Lord give you understanding' - so here is some understanding:

In the late 300's AD Vegetius, as he is known, wrote an army manual, and in his first book he compared the early Roman army (Paul's time) with the one in his day 300 years later, advising the modern army should change back to its old ways. In his day he noted the army soldiers came from wealthy families, with sons who grew up in the city with servants, and they saw the army as a career path. Their parents would buy officer commissions for them. They were 'soft' compared to the early Roman army, the army of Paul's time.

But in Paul's day the soldiers came from rural families, sons of the farm and ranch, and they were used to hard, physical labor. They were used to getting up early and working in all kinds of weather. Their rough life experience made them the best soldiers in the world, and propelled Rome to domination in Europe, the Middle East and north Africa.

A new soldier may have thought his rough upbringing and past disqualified him from serving the Emperor, but in fact that rough life is the very thing that most qualified him for service to the King!

Your sinful background isn't what disqualifies you, it is the very thing that qualifies you!

Paul told Timothy to endure hardness as a soldier. He didn't say he was a soldier in Christ, for we are not. He said to endure hardness as a soldier does. We are children of the King, members of the royal household. We are not soldiers for Jesus, but we are expected that our rough previous backgrounds serve us in our path to maturity in Christ, so that we have the same ability to endure all things that soldiers have.

In his day that is exactly accurate, these farm boys, these men who were used to working in all kinds of weather, needed to pull on that rough past in order to endure their present hardship. That is what Paul is asking Timothy and his readers to do - endure hardness as a soldier - pull on that strength of character that got you through all that sin to bring you to Jesus! Those tough experiences help you press on to maturity in Christ!

Paul told him no soldier entangles himself with the affairs of this life. That word 'entangles' means 'to weave together' or 'entwine', and 'affairs of this life' is the Greek word 'pragmateiais' is where we get 'pragmatic', meaning a soldier does not weave his life together with the mundane things of civilian life - that he may please him who selected him to be part of the army!

As in Paul's day, we have a Recruiter. One named Jesus who recruited us to be in Him. But it gets better than this, for Paul said that we might please Him who enlisted us - there is one Greek word for 'enlisted him to be a soldier' that Paul used, it is: 'stratologeo'. Look at the Greek words combined to create this word: Strato is where we get strategy, and logeo where we get logic, meaning when combined, chosen by your enlisting Officer with a strategy, a logic, a plan in mind.

Let's put it all together now...

Paul told Timothy to endure hardness like a soldier does - that the hardness of a past life is the very thing that qualifies us to be in Christ. To remember that we are not to weave our life together with the mundane normal things as first priority, that we may please the One who chose us with a larger strategy, plan, and purpose for serving the King.

And now to the athlete...and that's for next week...until then, blessings,

John Fenn

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The Soldier, Athlete, and Farmer, #2

Hi all,

Many years ago a pastor called me on the phone, asking me to consider joining his multi-level marketing team. A multi-level company is one in which a pyramid is built, with everyone you get to join coming under you, and everyone they get to join them under them, and so on. Each person gets a commission from those beneath him, with the guy at the top of the pyramid getting the largest commission because a portion of all sales under him go to him.

I was a pastor in a small town at the time, as was he. We might have 60 adults on a Sunday morning, so would he. But he was making today's equivalent adjusting for inflation, of \$225,000. We were living day to day. He was involved in a company that sold personal care products like soaps and shampoos, and he talked of how he got nearly all his congregation involved, so that they too were making good money.

As a result, they had paid off the church mortgage, had money in the bank, and life was good. I was living offering to offering, had next to nothing in the bank, and was thankful we lived in a farming community because several church members blessed us with fresh milk, meat, and vegetables to supplement my pay.

I turned him down, horrified at what he told me, telling him his gain was short lived because he was not honoring the call on his life, using his position to influence people for other than growing in Christ. If he was in business to be a business his actions would be fine, but one does not use a spiritual position to manipulate people for personal gain. (His church dissolved, as did his income months later)

Play by the rules doesn't mean what you think...

After Paul told Timothy to endure hardship the way a soldier does, he said this single line in II Timothy 2:5: "And if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not get the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules."

On first glance it would appear Paul is giving Timothy instructions to be morally upright, to 'play by the rules', to not use or manipulate people, they way athletic events are conducted with rules. While that is true, there is a deeper meaning.

Competing according to the rules also includes the training rules and regime. Consider our day when athletes are tested for performance enhancing drugs taken in their training, for they must compete according to the rules of training as well as in the competition in order to be considered worthy to compete. It is all one package in our day and in Paul's: The training and competing rules are one, and an athlete must train and compete according to strictly enforced rules.

Our lives in Christ must be more than what people see on the outside, the rules also apply to our private lives. We cannot put on our 'church face' being sweet as honey, then go home and live like the devil. The rules apply to our whole lives.

What rules did the athlete have in Paul's day? How did they train?

Paul is using the athlete as he did the soldier, as a parable to make a spiritual point, and he told Timothy to consider his words and the Lord would give him understanding, so let us consider and understand.

Athletes trained and competed in the nude in Paul's day. The man would come to the gymnasium area from his home, and take off all his clothes. This is symbolic that in Christ we bring nothing of value to Him, and nothing of our own efforts and doing can be used in Him. We are stripped to who we are, completely open and naked, as Hebrews 4:12-13 says after speaking how the Word pierces our soul and spirit, "...and all things are open and naked before Him with whom we have to do." In other words, the Living Word sees our heart and soul and nothing is hidden from Him. We are naked before the Lord at all times, 24/7, clothed only by His robes of righteousness.

And so the naked athlete is then given an olive oil rub down, a massage from a trainer from head to toe. Our Trainer, the Lord Jesus, applies the oil of the Holy Spirit all over us, which coats our nakedness, loosens up our spiritual muscles, and prepares us for what comes next. We are at ease in His presence, coated with the Father's Spirit covering our nakedness.

After the first coat of oil is applied the athlete then goes to a sauna. The heat for our parable represents hardship in life, but we are not naked as we suppose, we are coated and clothed with the Holy Spirit, yoked with Him together in the heat as He walks with us through the process. We must stay in the sauna until the heat has accomplished its work in us. Let the oil work in the heat, let your spiritual muscles loosen up and absorb the oil of the Spirit. To leave the heat before the work is done only means you'll have to go right back there one day until you do allow the Spirit to soak into your spiritual pores.

Then the athlete comes out of the heat and once again gets a massage and rub down with more oil. After our own hardship the Holy Spirit comes afresh to us, renewing us, encouraging us, and giving us time to recover from the heat of the sauna.

Depending on the athlete and their needs, there might be another trip to the heat of the sauna followed by another massage and coat of oil - it varied in Paul's day as spiritually speaking, it does for us as well. But after the 2nd or 3rd cycle, the athlete stood up and the Trainer now coated him head to foot with thick oil. Other ingredients were added to make the oil less liquid and more paste-like.

It made the athlete hard to hold onto, slippery, for after this the athlete stepped into the arena to face his opponent. Spiritually, this is the extra anointing of the Spirit that empowers us for spiritual battle. It is the anointing that comes on us for intercessory prayer. It is the grace that carries us through difficult circumstances. This coating makes us slippery to the enemy; he cannot grasp us for we have a 'thick' coat of the Holy Spirit's presence on us. The enemy tries to hold onto us, but just gets a handful of the Spirit - on top of our regular oil coating, this one is for battle, for getting us through tough times, for striving for the victory over every circumstance against us.

And when the competition was over, the athlete returned to his Trainer as we do to our Lord, and that thick oil used just for the competition is scraped off, cleaned, and prepared for use again in another competition. Similarly, we can feel that extra anointing lift that carried us through, but we know He will be there for us just as thick in a future battle.

Yes Timothy, we win by living according to the rules. We must be willing to strip off our street clothes to become naked before the Lord, coated only with the Holy Spirit. We must endure the heat of the sauna and be re-coated each time. We must allow our Trainer to massage us, deeply working in our being which seems at the time both relaxing and a bit painful, but He is preparing us for that thick coating of the Spirit required for the upcoming event - and when we are done, our Trainer will be right there for waiting for us, consoling us, massaging us again, ministering to us as only He can.

Yes Timothy, be like the athlete, but train and compete according to the rules...submit to your Trainer, and win! Next week, the farmer...until then, blessings,

John Fenn

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The Soldier, Athlete, and Farmer #3

Hi all,

At the time I was the Director for a ministry's Bible school in a country other than the US, and was approached by some pastors there about a minister rising in popularity that didn't look like any of them, with his tattoos and clothing right off the street. Yet they were in awe of the miracles claimed to have been done in his meetings. They were quite upset over his rising popularity not because of his rough appearance, but by the details of his private life.

They presented me with their dilemma as he pressured them to invite him to their churches: On the one hand, he claimed great miracles were done by the Lord, especially in overseas meetings - healings, people getting out of wheelchairs, and so on. But on the other hand, it was commonly reported he was unfaithful to his wife, had issues with drugs and alcohol, and anger & abuse accusations were heard as well. His private life didn't seem to be consistent with the Christian character one would expect of a minister and leader.

After much discussion everyone agreed that at some point in time, of the Lord's determination, if he didn't repent his sin would be exposed to the public. Until then each pastor had to decide for himself whether to

invite him to their church or not. As far as I know, not a one of them did, and the minister soon had to go to another nation to those unfamiliar with him.

Endure difficulty like soldiers do, have the mindset of an athlete in training, and be like a....farmer?

I've been sharing from II Timothy 2:1-6 in which Paul instructs Timothy in 3 areas, which match perfectly the 3 parts of man: Body, soul, and spirit.

Paul told Timothy to endure hardship like a soldier does. Not that he is a soldier, but to endure the physical difficulties that soldiers do. That could mean arrest, torture, or death. Travel was on foot and/or ship, in all kinds of weather and cultures. Then he moved to the soul, telling him to train and compete according to the rules, to endure the emotional difficulties of being stripped down before the Lord and coated with the oil of the Spirit, which makes us slippery to the enemy.

Now Paul moves to the spiritual aspect, telling Timothy in verse 6: "The farmer must be the first to partake of his crops."

When we take this verse apart we see the Greek says "The hard-working farmer", so this speaks to diligence, to the farmer's life of difficult manual labor, used as an example of spiritual difficulties.

The tough life of a farmer is likened to spiritual toughness, and as a farmer must be diligent to know all the aspects that make for a successful crop, and be willing to work in all conditions because when the time is right, the time is right -the farmer must tend to the seed and crop when it is right - he can't wait until a warm sunny day if the seed or field or crop indicates it is ready now. So too spiritually we must be diligent, unchanged by circumstances, focused on the crop, the work at hand. Spiritual toughness, a willingness to lay all aside because spiritually God is calling and the field/crop requires our focus.

This could mean when you have the urge to pray for someone, you leave what you are doing to go pray for them. It means when you're out the door for one thing, and a brother or sister calls for you to help them, you change your focus because spiritual things take precedent. The things of the heart and spirit are elevated to be the most important thing in our life.

This speaks of overseeing not just the planting of a crop and harvest, but everything related to the farm: Soil preparation, planting, weeding, determining the right time to harvest, coordinating workers, gathering and preparing the harvest for use and market, and holding back enough seed for next year's crops, and much more. It requires diligence and focus.

The soil is the human heart

Paul says the farmer must be the first to eat of the crops that came from his soil. What does he mean?

In Mark 4 Jesus gave the parable of the sower, explaining in v13 that if you didn't understand this parable, you wouldn't understand any other parable He taught. That statement makes this parable the single most important parable, and the writers of the New Testament stayed with that example in their own writings. One example of that is this passage.

In the parable the sower sows the Word into the ground - the ground is the human heart - which is where the Seed grows, and depending on the condition of the soil/heart, the seed/Word grows accordingly.

Paul follows the Lord's example using the farmer, who sows seeds, so we understand the seed is planted in the ground, the human heart, and from that a crop grows. Paul is saying the farmer must first eat of the crop that grows in his heart. If the soil is the heart, the crop growing from the heart is the fruit of the Spirit - the fruit of the (human) spirit Paul writes about in Galatians 5:22-23, that grow out of the heart (spirit) of a born again person.

It requires hard work and diligence that causes that seed to grow and develop, and the farmer (you and I), must watch over the seed of the Word in our hearts and nourish it, make it a priority. You know how a seed develops: It first pops up through the soil (heart), delicate, needing the right conditions to grow - water, light, nourishment from the soil - and the gardener or farmer must make that seeding first priority.

He or she watches it daily, cares for it, picking off any damaging insects which might try to destroy it. So too Paul tells Timothy to protect and nourish your spirit man. Don't let things which would damage the Life in your spirit threaten. Pick off the damaging insects (demonic and other forces) that would try to destroy the

plant. If you read Mark 4:11-19 you'll see that sometimes the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and lusts for things 'enter in and choke the Word'.

Paul is building from that parable of Jesus and telling him not to let anything choke off the Word in his life - do all you can to nurture your spiritual life by providing a safe and nourishing environment. Don't entertain the things that do not contribute to healthy growth.

The word Paul uses to say the farmer is the first to 'partake' of the crop means 'to participate, to eat, to receive, to take'. It means exactly what it says - you have to practice what you preach. You can't be like the minister above who preaches one thing and then lives another at home.

IF you can endure physical discomfort or pain like a soldier, IF you are willing to take the emotional discipline as part of your life and return to your Trainer for more 'oil' after each contest, then it is understood you must be the first to eat of the crop of your own heart, you must walk in the revelation you have, the light you have. You must establish priorities and boundaries involving all three elements Paul teaches here. Our lives must be consistent from spirit to soul outward to our body/lives.

That doesn't mean we are accountable to perfection, but we are accountable to growth. Being a disciple of Jesus is a serious undertaking, a day to day series of decisions to let Him change us from the inside out. He uses every circumstance, every closed door, every difficulty, as an opportunity for our growth. He doesn't cause hardship, we do that to ourselves or the enemy tempts and tries us, but the Father is the Master at taking that which was meant for our destruction and turning it towards us growing more Christ-like.

As it was observed back in Mark 4:33, Jesus only taught the people as they were able to receive it. Are you able to receive more? Be careful, for if you say yes, you are instantly accountable for what He gives you. To walk in that light you'll have to be willing to endure difficulties like the soldier, the mental ups and downs of an athlete in training, and the spiritual diligence of being like Jesus your #1 goal in life, no matter what life throws at you. It is a rich life however, spiritually and internally speaking. Others won't always understand, but that's part of the price to pay for being Christ-like. It is our call.

New subject next week, until then, blessings,
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