



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

**“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy... strength.”**

The last of these categories with which we are to love the Lord our God is the most difficult to define. It's as though Jesus is saying, “You've asked what is the greatest or the first or the principle thing in life (what he calls *the greatest commandment*). “Well, the answer is that we be lovers of God, and love him with all our hearts, souls, and minds. In fact, in every aspect of our being. With all our strength. Not just the affections, not just the connections and relationships of life, not just the mind and the intellect, but all you are and have--every aspect of life, including the body and its faculties. Everything.” That's what God requires.

This cannot be done perfectly, of course, which is why we need a Savior. That is why Jesus had to die on the cross to atone for our constant failure to fulfill this command, which sums up the law of God. But for those who are the children of the Father this is the goal, this is the purpose and end of our existence, this is what matters most, to love the Lord your God with all your strength, with every faculty and power--body and mind, body and soul—the spiritual, the psychological, the intellectual, and the physical. All of it brought together and united in this single cause of loving God.

I doubt you will find a better commentary on what Jesus intended by this word than St. Paul's second letter to Timothy. He wrote the epistle because the young pastor was both discouraged and intimidated. He was surrounded by false teaching; people were disparaging him because of his youth; and, he appears to have suffered from a weak stomach. Add to this the fact that his mentor, the Apostle Paul, was in prison for his defense of the Gospel and might soon be relieved of his head.

Timothy was anxious and fearful. Paul had ended his first epistle to him with the words, *Fight the good fight of faith*, adding the very personal word in verse 20, *Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care*. All this was overwhelming. The Christian life can seem overwhelming. You may be a priest, or a deacon, a Sunday School teacher, or a volunteer, and people have hurt you, or you feel overwhelmed by the need or by the time commitments demanded of you. You may feel you can't take any more, and that it is all too much for you. You may be a Christian resisting temptation, but just overwhelmed by the struggle. Well, Paul's words to Timothy are God's words to you, *Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus*.

What I want to emphasize at this point is how the Apostle works this out by using three metaphors for the Christian--a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer--who is seeking to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

A good soldier is willing to endure hardship. There are brothers and sisters throughout the world who can teach us what this means, which is why we need to hear from missionaries, and, when possible, visitors from countries where Christians make the ultimate sacrifice. What if Christ told you today to sell all you have and give it to the poor? That's the test, and I must confess, I'm not sure how I would fare.

A good soldier also refuses to be distracted from his goal, which Paul defines as pleasing *his commanding officer*. What does he mean? What is forbidden are those entanglements which, though perhaps even legitimate and innocent in themselves, can hinder us from fighting the fight of faith. The ability to shut out everything that does not enable us to succeed is the key to success in everything. The issue is one of

priorities. If something was affecting your business you'd be quick to get rid of it. Well, what if something interferes in your spiritual life? What if something is dragging you down spiritually?

Similarly, St. Paul says, *if anyone competes as an athlete he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules.* You often hear people quoting Winston Churchill, but, you know, would be unelectable today. Imagine a politician with this platform, "All I have to offer you is blood, sweat, and tears." What preacher would go before a congregation of Christian people with such a message. Well, Paul did. That's what he says here to Timothy. Jesus told people in his day they should not follow him until they had counted the cost, which was heavy.

The third analogy is from agriculture, and takes a different, though complementary direction, *A hard-working farmer, says the Apostle, should be the first to receive a share of the crops.* What does he mean? Well, farming is hard work. The farmer's life involves early and long hours, constant toil. There is ploughing, sowing, tending, weeding, reaping, storing. A lot of perseverance is needed if the farmer is to share the crops.

I imagine some of you are saying, "Help." Some of you may be thinking that if this is the Christian life then I might as well quit. There's no hope for me. I don't have that much strength. I'm a weak person, often sick and weary. I can't live like a soldier or an athlete. Let me tell you, if that is what you're thinking then you're one with all the people of God because if that is all there was to say about this we might as well all give up right now. Thank God it isn't. In fact, this is why the verse "*Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus*" is so important.

You see, we need supernatural strength, because to fulfill the law of love as it is laid out in the word of God we need strength outside of ourselves. That's the twist here. Jesus said to his followers, *Love the Lord your God with all your strength*; but then, at the end of his ministry, before ascending to the right hand of the Father, he gave them the strength they needed to pull this off. He gave them the Holy Spirit. Paul put it like this in another place, *I can do all things, though only through Christ who strengthens me.* Our confidence will be as unbounded as our dependence on God is complete.

God's treasure, wrote Paul to the Corinthians, is invested in broken people so that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us. That is what

Jesus said to this Apostle when he turned down repeated requests from him to have what he called *a thorn in the flesh* removed. *My grace is sufficient for you,* he said, *for my strength is made perfect in your weakness.* The same Apostle who exhorted Timothy to be strong gloried in his weaknesses. In fact, he said, I would rather glory in my weaknesses than my strengths because when I am the weakest is when I am the strongest.

When Jesus said that the purpose of all the workings of the Father's grace in our lives was so that we might love him with all our strength he knew what that would mean for him. He is our example, and what he did is what we are called to do. In fact, if observe the Father and his only begotten Son we will see exactly what Jesus had in mind. Just think of John 3:16. *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.* The Bible says that *God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.* This is how love is measured in the Bible, *not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin.* In other words, the cross is the measure of love where in weakness and brokenness our Savior overcame the world.

That is the image of the strong who will inherit the earth. It is those whose strength is perfected in complete dependence on the empowering grace of God, and who stand in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. The wonderful thing is that even when we are faithless he does not renege on us. *If we are faithless,* says Paul to Timothy, *he remains faithful.* It is a faithful Father we love and a faithful Savior we serve, who said, *Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.* He cannot deny himself, you see. He is true to his covenant, true to his promises, true to his people. The one who said, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself,* is the one who gives us the strength to love him, and then remains faithful in everything, and forever! Amen.

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***