

Two More Models of the Faithful Christian: The Athlete and the Farmer

2 Timothy 2:5-7

2 Timothy 2:5-7: *“And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. ⁶ The hardworking farmer must be first to partake of the crops. ⁷ Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things.”*

Background Notes

The apostle Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter to Timothy. 2 Timothy was his last letter. Paul realized that his life was drawing to a close, and he wanted to challenge Timothy to carry on the work as a faithful Christian. So in chapter 2 he gave Timothy several models for the faithful Christian. Paul himself had certainly followed the lessons from these models, and he encouraged Timothy to do the same.

In verses 5-6 Paul gave the models of the athlete and the farmer. The primary idea in the model of the athlete is discipline, and the primary idea in the model of the farmer is labor, or hard work.

Remember – the athlete the apostle Paul was thinking about was not a weekend softball player who blows the dust off his glove once a week. Paul was thinking of an elite athlete in the Greek games. The Greek games were the roots of our modern Olympic games, and the participants were highly trained athletes – then and today.

And Paul was not thinking about the present day farmer who has all kinds of modern mechanized equipment. He was thinking about the farmer of the 1st century, who labored long and hard in the fields for many hours a day, working by hand under the hot sun. No air-conditioned tractor – or any other kind of power equipment!

Just as Paul used illustrations from everyday 1st century life, we too can see lessons coming out in these models, and in other everyday illustrations, too. That’s a biblical principle. The Lord used this teaching method. He took activities and items from everyday life, and used these models to relate spiritual lessons to others. That’s the way God designed things.

In verse 7, Paul told Timothy to *“consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things.”* In other words, think over these models, Timothy. Meditate on these models, and the Lord will give you further understanding into the lessons of these models.

2 Timothy is God's Word to us. If we think through the implications of these models of the faithful Christian, the Lord will give us further understanding and insight into the life lessons that they teach.

Doctrinal Points

1. Like an athlete, the faithful Christian is disciplined in training.

The Greek runner had to follow rules - training rules as well as the rules of the race. Have you ever trained seriously for track or some other sport? If you're going to be a successful athlete in any sport, you must be disciplined in your training. There are rules for diet, and curfew, and workouts, and practice, practice, practice! You know you have to be disciplined in your training or you'll never make it. You'll never be in shape and ready for the contest.

To be successful in competitive sports, you've got to be disciplined in training. The same is true in the Christian life. Like an athlete, the faithful Christian must be disciplined in training. Getting to know God's Word well takes discipline and training. It takes discipline to set the alarm early to make time to study scripture. It takes discipline to memorize scripture. It takes discipline to have a prayer life as a believer.

In my own personal life, it takes more discipline for me to pray often and regularly - more than anything else. It doesn't take me a lot of discipline to sit down and study God's Word - I love doing that! But for me, praying often and regularly takes discipline. It doesn't happen automatically. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:27, "*I buffet [strike a blow to] my body and make it my slave...*" He didn't mean there that he beat himself with a whip or a bat. No. He meant "I **discipline my body** and bring it into subjection, like an athlete." The faithful Christian is disciplined in training.

2. Like an athlete, the faithful Christian is disciplined in running the race.

Suppose a Greek runner entered the stadium to run that last lap of the marathon, and found himself fifty yards behind the lead runner – and suppose he decided to win the race by cutting across the infield to get to the finish line first. No crown for him! It wouldn't matter how disciplined the runner had been in training. He wasn't disciplined in running the race. He cheated. He did not compete according to the rules.

This is also true in the Christian life. You must be disciplined in your training – but you also must be disciplined in how you live your life. You may be disciplined in reading the Bible; you may be disciplined in memorizing Scripture; you may be disciplined in attending church services - but if you cheat on school exams, or you cheat on your income tax, or you don't return money to the store that undercharged you, or you conveniently forgot to pay your loan, or you take materials home from work, or you lie on job application forms - you're cheating! You're not running the race according to the rules!

You're not following the models for faithful Christian living. Like an athlete, the faithful Christian must be disciplined in training **and** in running the race!

When our son David was a boy, he and I went to buy lumber for a home project. Before we checked out, I asked David how much he thought it was all going to cost, and he came up with the figure of \$100. I told him it was going to cost more than that - but when the clerk rang it up, the bill came up to \$100! Young David was a better estimator than I was! But when we got home we discovered that some major items had been overlooked at the checkout, and the amount was more like \$250! I went back to pay for the rest of the items, telling them that I was a Christian and that this was the right thing to do. The guy at the store said he was a Baptist - but he would never do that! Hopefully this episode was a good example for him of running the race "according to the rules"!

Will you be a medalist - or will you be an "also-ran"? In the Olympic Games today, it must be a great thrill to stand on the winner's stand, receive a medal, and hear your country's national anthem played. But what a much greater thrill to stand before the Lord and hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Every true believer will be in Heaven, but believers who don't run the race well won't get to hear the words of commendation from the Lord: "Well done, good and faithful servant." 1 Corinthians 3 indicates that some believers get in by the skin of their teeth. They will get in, but there will be no reward. Will you be a medalist - or an "also-ran"?

1 Corinthians 9:24-25 says, "*Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.*" Some Christians disqualify themselves for medals because of disobedience. The good news here is that every Christian has the potential of being a medalist. No one has to be an also-ran. Be a faithful and fruitful Christian and you'll be a medalist!

But the question remains: will **you** be a medalist - or an "also-ran"?

3. Like a farmer, a faithful Christian labors for the harvest.

Verse 6: "*The hardworking farmer must be first to partake of the crops.*"

Hard work, or labor, is the primary thought in the model of the farmer. How many of you have ever had a garden? Most of us have done some gardening at one time or another, and we all know that it's a lot of work: preparing the soil, planting the seed, weeding, watering, cultivating, making sure the wild animals don't eat the tomatoes, etc.

Like a farmer, a faithful Christian labors for the harvest. The farmer must labor patiently - preparing the soil, planting the seed, watering, weeding, and looking forward to the harvest. It's a lot of hard work. There are no short cuts. There are no instant results. The farmer doesn't work hard for a medal or a laurel wreath or a crown, as the athlete does. The farmer works hard for the **harvest**. That's the farmer's goal and reward!

Spiritually speaking, what is the harvest? The harvest is people who are brought to salvation through Jesus Christ. It's people who are brought to maturity in Christ. Like a farmer, a faithful Christian labors for the harvest.

Practical Application

How big a shareholder are you?

Verse 6 says, *"The hardworking farmer must be first to partake of the crops."*

We're not talking about holding shares in stocks and bonds - we're talking about having a share in the crops of the "people harvest."

If you're willing to work hard, like the farmer, you can be sure of two things:

1. There will be a harvest. In Isaiah 55:11 God says, *"My word will not return unto Me void."* And 1 Corinthians 15:58 says, *"Your labor is not in vain in the Lord."*

2. You will share in that harvest. If you are willing to labor hard like a farmer, you can be sure you will share in the harvest. The hardworking farmer must be the first to partake of the crops!

Your share in the harvest of the crops is proportional to the labor. You get joy and blessing now as you see people rescued – people who were on the road to hell. And then just think of the joy and blessing in Heaven when someone says to you, "I'm here because you worked hard for the harvest during your life on earth!"

Maybe you reached out to help them when they were in need. Maybe you gave them that little booklet. Maybe you befriended them and talked to them. Your share in the harvest - forever - is proportional to your labor here on earth.

How big a shareholder are you?