

No Gains Without Pains

Text: 2 Timothy 2:3–7, especially verse 3: You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

Introduction: I would like to expound to you this morning my belief that there are no spiritual gains without pains. I should as soon expect a farmer to prosper in business who contented himself with sowing his fields and never looking at them till harvest, as expect a believer to attain much holiness who was not diligent about his Bible-reading, his prayers and the use of his Sundays. Our God is a God who works by means. This principle not only applies to passive holiness which we call righteousness but to active holiness which is Christian service.

We see this principle throughout the Bible. Consider

- **The Parable of the Talents:** the servant who was condemned was the one who did precisely nothing but wait for the Master to return – the servants who were commended were the ones who labored diligently at increasing their gifts.
- **The Parable of the Feast:** the servants had to go out into the highways and byways and compel the world to come in.
- **The Story of the Children of Israel:** Using their history as a metaphor we use the Exodus from Egypt as an image of salvation from the bondage of sin. Going into Canaan, therefore, is not referring to salvation but to entering the mature Christian walk, claiming and resting in the promises of God. But notice that they still had to fight – they still had to work.
- **Love as an action:** I love my wife therefore I serve her. I love God therefore I serve Him. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:10 that each of us will receive what we should get – good or bad – for the things we did in this earthly body. But it should not be a fear of judgment that drives us for four verses later in 5:14 he says that it is the love of God that controls (or drives) us. Jesus said in John 14:15 “If you love me keep my commandments.” Keeping His commands require discipline and diligence but implies that we are driven by devotion.
- **Paul himself is an example.** The secret of his success was “God’s grace plus hard work” (1 Cor. 15:9–10).

Here in 2 Timothy, his labor was shortly to be ended by an executioner’s sword, so he was entrusting the Gospel work to his younger protégé, Timothy, telling him at the beginning of chapter 2 to entrust it to other faithful men who will pass it on to others as well. In the next verses Paul illustrated his point using three metaphors from the Roman Empire, each emphasizing a different aspect of the principle “no gains without pains.”

1. **The Soldier, Characterized by Devotion (v. 4).** The Christian as a soldier is a familiar image in Paul’s writings, not just because soldiers were a familiar sight in every town and outpost of the empire, but because Paul spent years in close proximity to them. He often described the Christian life as a warfare, but the emphasis here is more specific, on a devotion to duty that inevitably means hardship. The Greek word implies suffering. Sharing the gospel always draws opposition from its enemies, and some of Paul’s trusted “soldiers” had recently deserted him in Asia (1:15). He reminded Timothy that suffering is the badge of authenticity for genuine disciples. We must be ready for action and prepared to fight and suffer. We can’t afford to be entangled in civilian affairs. There has been much discussion as to what Paul meant here by *the affairs of this life*, but the key lies in the word *entangles*. It is not just sin that entangles but other things which, while legitimate, may hamper our effectiveness for Christ. A test for any activity we’re considering is: Will it hamper my Christian service? Paul added that motive for this suffering is our desire to please Christ, our commanding officer.
2. **The Athlete, Characterized by Discipline (v. 5).** Here is another of Paul’s favorite metaphors. In this instance, he emphasized the need for single-mindedness and discipline. The literal translation says that the athlete does not qualify unless he competes lawfully. In the ancient world, this word described a professional athlete. In the Greek games, the athletes had to swear on oath that they had completed a full ten months of rigorous training before they were allowed to compete in the race. So the Christian is one who is disciplined in his or her personal life and walk

with God. There is no short-cut to glory, only rigorous discipline. Yet how many of us think we can get by with a minimum of effort. For some, the Christian faith is little more than a Sunday hobby, despite what they profess with their lips. Becoming good disciples means dedicated discipline over as many years as God gives us. The only alternative is to drop out of the race and become a spectator or critic—and there are plenty of those around.

- 3. The Farmer, Characterized by Diligence (v. 6).** In the first century (and in many places today), farming was all hard, back-breaking manual labor. The word *hardworking* implies toil that produces weariness or exhaustion. The farmer doesn't just drop seed into the ground then retire to the Bahamas for a few months. He is out and about every day at all hours, tending, weeding, caring, cultivating the precious crop. There isn't much glamour in working in the pouring rain at the end of a long day. But it's absolutely necessary if we're to reap a plentiful ingathering (Prov. 20:4 and 24:30–31), and it is worth it, for we will share in the ultimate harvest.

Conclusion: There are no gains without pains, but the gains more than compensate for the pains. In the final chapter of this letter Paul writes that he has fought the good fight—he has maintained devotion, discipline, and diligence—and is ready for the crown of righteousness which has been laid up for him. May that be our experience, too, whenever He comes or calls!