

“Soldiers of Christ” (Memorial Day)

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Opening Prayer

Good Morning Folks, I hope you all are doing well. We have been praying for you, and you have been very much missed. God willing we will start to see each other again soon, we have plans in place for slowly returning to worship, and you will hear about those after the message. If there is an encouragement I can give you on the front end of worship today it is this... God is going to send the coronavirus straight to hell on judgement day. Check out Revelation 20, and know that it is true. I think that all of us can agree that hell is exactly where this stinking pandemic belongs... On another note, today is a special day, or at least tomorrow will be that special day. Today we celebrate early Memorial Day, and we remember our brave men and women who have given their lives to protect our nation. Additionally, we also remember the brave men and women who are among us (especially our two who are out serving now!) who continue to keep us safe. In remembering our soldiers we are going to look at a calling by the Apostle Paul that should ring true for all of us... the call to be good “Soldiers of Christ.” As we talk about being “Soldiers of Christ” we are going to understand our calling through the context of our own wonderful veterans.

As we get into our only reading for this morning, we should know the background of the book of 2nd Timothy. It is widely agreed upon that this is the Apostle Paul’s last book that he writes. By most accounts, the language that he uses gives a lot of credence to the thought that he was old and near execution when he wrote this. (He will say things in chapter four like “I have run the race, fought the good fight, I am being poured out like a drink offering, etc.) The guy who he is writing this letter to, Timothy, was one of Paul’s protégé’s who was pastoring the church in Ephesus. In this letter Paul’s calling to Timothy is to remain strong, to remind him and encourage him to continue to serve the Lord as he pastors the church through all kinds of things. Ephesus saw a lot of persecution of Christians in Timothy’s time, just as most other churches did that were within the Roman Empire. When Paul writes this letter to Timothy, to encourage him, he is already in prison being guarded by Roman soldiers. Throughout the course of the letter he will use several different real-world examples to show Timothy how he is to act and lead. In our reading for today alone we see that he uses the examples of athletes and farmers. Verses five and six read “Also, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules. The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops.” We could talk about those examples, but the biggest one that Paul uses is the soldier. In talking about strength and sacrifice as a Christian to Timothy he uses the image of what he himself is seeing... he tells Timothy to remain strong using the example of a soldier.

“You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 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. Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 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.” Those first four verses of 2nd Timothy 2 should make a big impression on us. The call to suffer for Christ, as a soldier would suffer for our country, is a daunting call. It takes guts, it takes perseverance, and it takes faith to do the work of a good soldier. In our minds when we think on Memorial Day about our fallen soldiers we think of the beaches of Normandy, Hamburger Hill, Fallujah, the Crossing of the Delaware, Appomattox, the Battle of Pusan, and a whole host of others. When we talk about soldiers and suffering, we know that they go hand in hand, even when the ultimate price isn’t paid. We accordingly remember that too on Memorial Day. All those families without a dad in the home for nine months, all those that have watched their sons and daughters leave for extended periods of time, all those military families that have moved from place to place in the blink of an eye, and all those who suffer war wounds that no one can see. Our soldiers, we know, put up with much for the sake of our country. Why? For some it is their job, as my marine brother in law likes to humbly say. For others it is for love of country. For others it is a necessity in times of great struggle. Whatever the reason, we know that our soldiers have gone and do go through much. When the Apostle Paul, then, equates our Christian life to that of a soldier, it should bring us pause. This is a great call that we have as Christians, and we would do well to learn from our soldiers’ examples.

If we compare being a soldier to being a Christian, we have to talk about what it is that we have gained and what we have sacrificed. For the soldier, as we have already mentioned, there is much that is given up... potentially even one’s life. There is also much, or there should be much, that is gained by being a good soldier. There is honor in serving well, there is respect, and there is a lifetime of friends and memories (both good and bad) that go with service. There is character built, and who a soldier becomes is always colored (at least in part right?) by their service. The greatest thing that a soldier gains, or at least should gain, is that pride that comes with protecting others. Our nation, our way of life, our families are all protected by those who serve. The same should be true of a Christian, both the expected sufferings and the joy.

To be a Christian does require sacrifice. To pretend otherwise is to cheapen our faith. Anything worth doing in this life requires sacrifice. Parenting requires sacrifice, succeeding in one’s job requires sacrifice, being responsible with your studies in school requires sacrifice. If our faith really does determine who we are, if Christ really is at our center, if we really are serving Him... then there will be sacrifice. In Timothy’s time sacrifice for Christ was expected, just as sacrifice is expected for our soldiers. For Paul, Timothy, and many of the other members of that church in Ephesus, it meant their lives. In our day, in the 21st century, for more Christians than ever before (yes, way more) it could mean the same. Egyptian, Syrian, Korean, Chinese, Bolivian, Turkish, Iraqi, Pakistani, East Timoran, Sudanese, and way more, Christian men and women live

knowing that at any moment they could be asked to give it all for Jesus. Even in our plush parts of the world, where we are by the grace of God given freedom to worship (thank you again veterans) there is always the chance that a terrorist or crazed individual will attack us for believing. (You may recall Columbine or the Texas church massacre.) Beyond just the fear of the ultimate sacrifice, to be a Christian does demand other sacrifices... things that we should not fear but embrace because we know whom we serve and why we serve Him.

Being a strong Christian (not a lukewarm one) requires much in the way of sacrifice. Evangelizing, speaking with others about the truth we hold, often results in ostracization. It could mean being bereted by a friend or family member who doesn't want to hear. The time we spend investing into our relationship with God reading our Bibles, praying, worshipping, and volunteering is sacrificed. The money we spend on giving, on church outreach, on others specifically because we love the Lord is sacrificed. Many of our wants that are counted as sinful are sacrificed so that we can instead follow what Christ has called us to do. It is part of who we are Beloved, and it should come as no surprise that the world doesn't understand when we follow Christ's commands and not anyone else's. It should also be no surprise to any of us, both here and abroad, that real persecution may come. Jesus Himself said in John 15:20 "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also." Sacrifice is an integral part of who we are, it is something that we do... just like a good soldier. But again the question remains... why?

Why sacrifice? Why follow Christ at all if it is going to really cost me something? We talked last week about folks in the book of Hebrews who were leaving the church for that reason. Well just like with the soldier there are maybe a few different answers that folks will give. However, serving Christ all comes back to one thing... salvation. For us and for others, salvation, an eternal relationship with the Lord, a purpose and a peace, is found only in serving Christ. This is the main point that Paul is trying to get Timothy, the church in Ephesus, and us to understand.

Verse 10 out of our reading states "For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory." For the Christian the sacrifices big and small that we make are completely worth it Beloved. Eternal glory, our eternal home with the Creator, is what we were made for. Our purpose here, our calling, is to share the eternal joy we have with others. It is worth sacrificing status in this world, or a little money, or our time, or even our lives for Jesus because everything here doesn't compare to what awaits us. Just like the good soldier who sacrifices part or all of himself for his fellows and his nation and his family, there are greater things worth acting for than just simple comfort.

So what should you make of all this this morning? What is the main takeaway? Well, as we remember this long weekend our fallen men and women in our country, we should also take to

heart Paul's calling. We are to be like good soldiers in our faith, willing to sacrifice for eternal glory. We shouldn't shy away from telling others about our faith for fear of ridicule. We shouldn't shy away from supporting our missionaries and our faith community just because it is inconvenient. We shouldn't stop volunteering and praying and getting to know the Lord better through scripture just because it is time consuming. We should be willing to sacrifice our comfort here knowing that there is something greater around the corner for us and for all who believe. Be about your father's business today and everyday, and serve Him as a good soldier of Christ... bringing the good news to all you encounter. Take the example of our veterans to heart, even as we honor them. Let us pray.

Closing Prayer