

## **SUSTAINING GRACES V**

### **II Timothy 3:1-5, 10-17**

This morning, we turn to the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of II Timothy—which leaves only chapter four of Paul’s last letter—the chapter where he says to Timothy, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (4:7). We’ll consider this great chapter together as we observe All Saints’ Day on the first Sunday in November.

On the two Sunday between now and then, we will have the privilege of hearing Reverend Lindsay Allen, Pastor of our Sister congregation, Carrickfergus Baptist Church in Carrickfergus, Northern Ireland. Invite everyone you know to come and be with us on these Sundays—you will not be disappointed!

Now, to “Sustaining Graces,” part five. There’s hardly a day that goes by that I do not learn of someone who’s lost a loved one, or been admitted to the hospital, heard a troubling diagnosis from their doctor, or received bad news about a job, a child, or something! This would be true for many of you as well.

Without the sustaining graces that God provides, we would probably just give up on life and give in to despair; but God sees us through these difficult times in our own lives and helps us travel alongside others as they experience them as well.

In our text for today, however, Paul is speaking of challenges we face--not simply because we are members of the human race, sharing in the same sadnesses and frustrations as everyone else—but he’s mentioning here the challenges that come our way specifically because we have decided to follow Jesus Christ.

Have you ever found yourself in a work environment where you spent eight or more hours a day with non-believers? Or it could be a school setting, or a neighborhood or social setting where, either intentionally or not, the people surrounding you made it difficult for you to live out your faith...or to stay true to your convictions.

Well, Paul and Timothy lived in a time and place that made being a Christian dangerous. As he wrote this letter, Paul’s commitment to Christ was about to cost him his earthly life—he would soon be martyred.

These dangers were real for any follower of Christ, but especially for someone like Timothy, a church leader. Given such difficult conditions, what are some of the sources of sustaining grace that Paul offers? Listen for them as we consider our text for today, the third chapter of II Timothy (**II Timothy 3:1-5, 10-17**):

<sup>1</sup>But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days.  
<sup>2</sup>People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy,  
<sup>3</sup>without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, <sup>4</sup>treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— <sup>5</sup>having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

*Paul continues to point out such problems and to give examples, but let's pick this back up at verse 10:*

<sup>10</sup>You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, <sup>11</sup>persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. <sup>12</sup>In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, <sup>13</sup>while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. <sup>14</sup>But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup>and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup>All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

**1.** What are the sustaining graces Paul is offering to Timothy here? Let's start with this one: **AWARENESS. II Timothy 3:1: "But mark this: there will be terrible times in the last days."**

This raises a question. Was Timothy already living in "the last days?" And how about us? Are we living in the last days? Well, the answer to both questions is "yes."

Now, some people understand "the last days" to refer to a briefer period of time just before the return of Christ. In other words,

when the last days come, Christ's return will be imminent. And there are a few Scriptures that use the phrase "last days" in reference to God's final judgment.

Many other Bible passages, however, use "the last days" to describe a much longer period of time. The prophet Joel, for instance, said, "'In the last days,' God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit on all people...'" (Joel 2:28).

Later, at Pentecost, Peter stood before the crowd and announced, "This is what Joel was talking about—these are the last days—the gift of God's Spirit is now ours through Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:16ff).

The writer of Hebrews began his book by saying: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these 'last days' he has spoken to us by his Son..." (Hebrews 1:1-2). The "last days," then, refer to the period of time between Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension and his second coming.

So, yes, we're living in the last days. But so were St. Augustine and Martin Luther. And so will be our brothers and sisters in the faith who come after us—and this will continue until that last day, known only to the Father Himself, when Christ will come again.

Now, Paul doesn't pull any punches as he discusses what life will be like in the meantime. He says "There will be terrible times in the last days." In vv. 2-5, he describes what will make them so terrible (from the New English Bible translation):

"Men will love nothing but money and self; they will be arrogant, boastful, and abusive; with no respect for parents, no gratitude, no piety, no natural affection; they will be implacable in their hatreds, scandal-mongers, intemperate and fierce, strangers to all goodness, traitors, adventurers, swollen with self-importance. They will be men who put pleasure in the place of God, men who preserve the outward form of religion, but are a standing denial of its reality." (II Timothy 3:2-5, NEB)

Does any of this sound familiar—painfully familiar? Paul has painted for us a terrible picture of a world that increasingly resembles the one we're living in. It is a lousy, last-days world that Paul is describing; and friends, if we're honest, we have to admit that what Paul pictures here is way too familiar!

Look at just the first phrase in this section: "Men will love nothing but money and self." Does that not describe the distorted values of our day?

We are created to love God supremely, but our capacity to love gets turned inward upon ourselves and outward to money and pleasures that we have been deceived into believing will make us happy. Let's take a closer look (the love of money and self):

A. MONEY: Jesus said more about money and possessions than any other subject. Why? He wasn't a fund-raiser. He had no budget to support or building debt to retire. He was motivated by something else--his concern for people; his awareness of how we can be so captivated by money that it shrivels our souls?

B. SELF: Jesus commends a healthy self-love. He tells us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. But we forget that, according to his teachings, love for self must always be tied to love for our neighbor. When this is lacking, self-love becomes ugly and destructive; and it makes life together almost unbearable.

The Catholic Archdiocese of Boston found itself in a bit of a predicament. It didn't have enough priests. Someone came up with the idea of advertising as a way of encouraging young men to consider the priesthood. A local ad agency volunteered their resources for the project.

But how in the world would they try to sell this idea? Well, let me tell you what they came up with. The ad began with a blur of images—one right after another, and all of them related to wealth: a gold watch, a diamond bracelet, champagne, cocktails, pearls, poker chips, and caviar.

Then the screen goes black, followed by this tag line: "A world that doesn't deny itself anything...could use a few men who do." It ends with the hands of a priest holding up a communion wafer.

That's a commitment that every priest must make--to deny one's self in order to serve others—which means in Baptist life, where we know the meaning of "the priesthood of every believer"—that this is a decision, a commitment, that we all must make.

There is a higher calling for us than the kind of love of self and money which strives to have it all and hoard it all for us. Jesus

said, "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mk. 8:36).

But Jesus' views on this subject are not popular, friends--not then, and not now! Jesus' call to self-giving is not one the world chooses to heed. But it is how those who seek to be faithful to Christ choose to live. Which means Christians are distinctively different from the world around them—sometimes we forget this.

Here's what I think Paul may be getting at. Just being aware that these differences exist and that the gulf between believers and non-believers is growing can help to sustain us. We might as well expect some relationships to be strained and some ridicule to be directed our way if we live faithful to Christ's call in our lives. Just being aware can help.

**2.** But coupled with this awareness, there must also be **ENDURANCE**. Awareness of the challenges means we won't be caught off guard by them. But we still must find the grace of endurance.

I saw a cartoon in a friend's church newsletter. A woman is talking—you can only see her head. She begins: "So far today, Lord, I haven't criticized or found fault with anyone. I haven't spread gossip—I've tried to see only good in people. I've been patient and kind—my thoughts...loving and caring."

Then the picture widens, and we see the woman still in her night clothes, sitting on the edge of her bed, saying, "but now that it's time to get up, Lord, I'll need all the help I can get." She's right!

Paul gives us some pointers on how to endure. First, he relates his own experience. Beginning with **v. 10**, he says, "You...know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured." Then he affirms: "Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them." (II Timothy 3:10-11)

Paul persevered. He went through the tough times and kept the faith. He finished the race. You know, there are lots of Christians who are great at 95-yard dashes. The problem is, crossing the finish line requires you to go a hundred yards. And the last five

are often the toughest! You know how we are—we get tired. We want to quit. Let somebody else run this race for awhile!

Who do you know, who do you look up to as being heroic, because of the way they have endured to the end? 1) Maybe they experienced great adversity, but still maintained a radiant Christian witness. 2) They made a costly commitment for the sake of Christ and his Kingdom, and “stuck it out.”

3) These are the faithful souls who could use all the excuses the rest of us use for not doing what the Lord wants us to do, but they don’t. 4) They go beyond mere survival in their walk with the Lord to experience true abundance of life and joy in Jesus. They endure. By the grace of God in Christ Jesus, they endure!

Sometimes the thing that sustains us is our decision, our commitment that, come what may, we refuse to give up. “I can do all things through Christ who gives me the strength.” What an amazing grace this confidence brings to our lives—the sustaining grace of endurance. Where do we get it? Well, from...

**3. ...KNOWLEDGE.** But not just any knowledge. Listen to what Paul says in **verses 15 and 16**. He speaks of “...the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness...”

One of the Lord’s sustaining graces for us is Bible study—getting into the word of God and absorbing its truths because we know that it’s a letter from God with our names on it. Knowing the Bible, believing its truths, will help to sustain us as we go through moments of crisis.

Awhile back, I read a book on leadership by Max DePree, a highly successful businessman. In the book’s introduction, the author stated, “You can read this book quickly, but I hope you cannot finish it quickly.” And I thought to myself, what a great description of the Bible.

God’s word simply cannot be finished quickly. In fact, a whole lifetime of reading and study will not finish this book--for you see, as the written word of God, the Bible never finishes with us!

Our first graders who received Bibles from our church this morning—if they are studying the Holy Scriptures when they're ninety (and I trust they will be)—they still won't be done. Paul is letting Timothy know—and us too—that we need to study God's word to survive.

A growing, maturing knowledge of the Bible, received and incorporated into our lives by faith, sustains us! But we can't stop with knowledge only. What we know about God and His word must also be acted upon, so a final sustaining grace this morning:

**4. ACTION.** Why do we study the Bible? Not only for personal growth and knowledge; but—if you'll look at **v. 17**—"so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." That's knowledge that's up to something. It's acted upon, and it's another sustaining grace for our lives.

We don't mention the names of our heroes the way we once did, but one of ours is a woman named Annie Armstrong. She was a great advocate for missions. I mention her today because on her tombstone is inscribed this simple epitaph: "She hath done what she could."

That's all the Lord expects of any of us, friends—but listen: He does expect that! The Lord calls each one of us to do what we can do with the life and strength, the gifts and abilities, the resources and opportunities He has placed in our lives.

He equips us to do good work—to do every good work that's needed—for our lives and our church to be strong and effective for His glory. Each one of us must decide what this means for us—and then do it—and keep on doing it, as long as He gives us life and breath and strength.

The challenge is to not stop short, or fall short, but to endure to the end. God's word promises us that we can. It assures us that He will sustain us till our race is finished, and the victory won!

It won't always be easy—be aware of that. But God will sustain you by His grace. He will enable you to endure. Stay in God's word, and stay active in the work He's called you to do for Him.