Strong Grace

## Understanding Grace

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**Bible Text:** 2 Timothy 2:1-7

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### Faith Church

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Our annual theme this year is "Finding Grace." In Hebrews 4, the Lord invites us to his throne in order to receive mercy and grace in our time of need and it's the death, the burial and the resurrection of Christ that makes finding grace and participating in communion possible. In that sense, our series is a perfect complement to communion and I hope that you have this year so far been thinking about God's grace. We've been singing about it. We've been teaching about it and I hope you've been meditating on it throughout the week. We've talked about not only learning to come to the throne of grace but also that believers stand in grace. We are positionally according to Romans 5:2, standing in grace. You are in Christ. You are always on the surface of grace. You live your life surrounded by grace. It's the name of the street you live on, 522 Grace Avenue. It's the name of the building you work in, One Grace Place. It's the name of your favorite restaurant, La Grace. Whatever it is, or Grace Garden. I don't know. Wherever you go, you are in the location of grace.

Not only that, not only wherever you are, but grace abounds above our sin. That's what Romans 5:20 says. Don't you love the imagery that grace always rises to the occasion? It's always enough because it's abundant. Pick the amount of sinfulness and grace goes over the top. It abounds. It's more. This is a part of the Gospel that needs to be so clear that, yes, we're sinners, sin abounds, and if you're here this morning and you're saying, "Do you know what? You don't have to convince me. This week, I had evidences of abounding sin. I know I've been heading in the wrong direction for a long, long time." And many people think that, "There is just no way that God would love me. There is no way that God would show grace to me." But grace abounds all the more and if you have yet to have grace abound to you to cover your sin, if you're here thinking, "There's just no way God can love me enough to invite me into a relationship with himself," grace abounds all the more and I would invite you even today to consider placing your faith and trust in Christ and in his abounding grace because his grace is just, quite frankly, bigger and better and stronger than your sin, even though we each individually know how deep and how bad our sin is. His grace is just better. Not only is his grace better, it has authority. It reigns. Grace reigns in the Christian life. Grace is reigning and leading us unto righteousness. And last week, we talked about grace being sufficient. Grace is all that we need for life and godliness even especially in the midst of trial.

Here is how I would summarize the last 6 weeks: grace is awesome. It's like a diamond that you look at from different angles and you're like, "Okay, grace is awesome. It's beautiful and I'm just going to turn it a little bit. Wow, that's pretty. Oh, that's amazing." And I hope throughout this year you keep rotating the wonderful treasure of grace and you just say, "Grace is awesome. God, the God of grace, is awesome." It gives hope, encouragement and help and it gives us something exciting to think about, to meditate on and to direct our lives based on. Something to rejoice in and something to rely on.

This morning we're going to give particular attention to the passage that commands us to be strong in grace. To be strong in the grace of our Lord Jesus so strong grace. We stand in grace. It abounds. Grace reigns. Grace is sufficient. And grace is strong. So here's the entire sermon in one sentence. Now, after I read this, you may not leave, okay? You can't say, "I heard the whole sermon so I'm out of here." Here is the sermon in one sentence: we need to be strong in the grace of Jesus Christ because we have a huge mission to accomplish. We need to be strong in grace because we have a huge mission to accomplish. The mission God has given us is worthy of our time and our effort but it's so big we simply cannot do it in our own strength. We must be strong in the grace of the Lord Jesus.

Before we get to our text, I think it's important to point out that one of our greatest struggles in accomplishing the mission that God gives us is fear. Fear of man plagues all of us to some degree. Ed Welch wrote a fantastic book called "When People are Big and God is Small." The title alone is just powerful to meditate on. Are people big or is God big? Is God small in my thinking? It reminds us that all of us at times are gripped by fear and oftentimes our decisions are motivated by fear rather than principle. I mean, can you remember the last time you struggled with fear? Was it this morning? Was it this week? Did you ever think this week or recently, "You know, I should have said something but didn't because I was afraid of what the other person might think of me. I should have done something but didn't do it because I was afraid of what would happen." Or maybe you did something that you shouldn't have done because you were afraid of everyone's response if you would have chosen to do the right thing. Fear can distract us from what the Lord would have for us.

So let's set aside fear for a moment and think about mission or better yet, let's think about what we need to accomplish the mission. Turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Timothy 2. Chapter 2, verses 1 through 7. That's on page 166 in the back section of the Bible in the chair ahead of you. Starting in verse 1,

1 You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2 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. 3 Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 4 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. 5 Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules. 6 The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops. 7 Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

Paul wrote to Timothy. He wrote this letter, 2 Timothy, to be an encouragement to Timothy. Timothy is his son in the faith. He says, "You therefore, my son." Paul has poured into Timothy's life and Paul is writing him this letter just prior to Paul's execution. This is the final letter that Paul writes as we know it. Therefore, Paul wrote this letter with a sense of urgency; a concern for his son in the faith, Timothy. You see, Paul had witnessed many people walking away from their faith due to pressure, due to suffering, due to fear or just changing their mind of what they valued. His concern was that his son in the faith would remain strong to the end.

The text begins, "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Let me make a few observations about "be strong" and then we'll get into the rest of the sermon. Be strong. First and foremost it's a command. He is saying to Timothy, "This is what you should do, be strong." For Timothy, being strong in grace was not optional like, "I'll be strong kind of if I feel like it today." He's saying, "No, this is a command. There is no way you can fulfill the mission God has called you any other way than by obeying this command to be strong." It's essentially a command to be dependent upon the Lord. It's a command to humility. "Be strong in the Lord" is "be humble because you're not strong in and of yourself." It's a command to humility. It's a command to be strong and dependent upon the Lord. It's a command.

Not only is it a command, it is to be done regularly. We always, always, always, always live in grace space wherever you are. Positionally I can never leave grace yet I'm commanded to be strong in grace. This is a very significant point, I think. I think most of you would say as you think about strength that you were stronger in high school or college than you are now. Is that true? Or has everybody perfectly maintained their fitness regimen that they're stronger now? Everybody is looking away from me. We have to admit that age takes its toll and we don't always exercise as we should and our bodies deteriorate and we get weaker and we don't focus on maintaining that strength as much as we should. Spiritually speaking, we have the exact same experiences. Many of us could point to times in our life where we were strong in our faith or weak in our faith. That happens over time. But Paul reminds his son in the faith "be strong all the time. Continually focus on your dependence. You need it. Be strong. Not for a while. Not if you feel like it. Not when it's good. Not only when it's hard. But all the time be dependent."

The third thing I want to point out is that it's not something you can do on your own. It's kind of, not really quite an oxymoron but, "Hey you, be strong." You're like, "I can't." Well, that's the pathway to recognizing God is the one who is going to do the actual strengthening. Even the way that Paul words it, "be strong," it's a passive way of communicating the command. "Be strong," indicating God is the one who is going to do the actual strengthening. Again, it speaks to our dependence, "I'm not able to develop the strength on my own. I need the strength that the Lord provides. I am not self-sufficient. I am dependent on the Lord for breath, for health, for grace to do all that he wants me to do."

So in this context, grace is God's divine enabling us to accomplish the mission he has and this "be strong" is a theme in all Scripture. This is not like a new thing Paul is saying. It's a theme of Scripture. I mean, think back to Moses transitioning to Joshua. New leadership. Joshua 1, God gave Joshua a job, like lead the nation of Israel. They're not that easy to lead. It's a big job. The command that he is given, Joshua, "Be strong and courageous." Friends, this is what the Christian life needs, entails. It takes strength. It takes divine enablement in order to properly live out the mission. It takes strength that comes from the grace that is in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So with that in mind, let's consider 3 aspects of our mission that require being strong in grace. Let's reveal how much we need grace so we can go to the throne of grace. Well, here's part of the mission: pass on what you have learned. That's what Paul says to Timothy, "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." Now, you read the passage and you might think, "Dustin, this passage is about you." There is no question that this is important for pastors and Christian leaders. There is no success without a successor. You have to pass on knowledge, etc. The passage is about me, Pastor Viars, all of our pastors but it's also about us. We as a church have collectively decided to start a seminary. We call it Faith Bible Seminary. We wanted to be a part of the model that's explained in the text and trusting God's truth to faithful men who will then teach others. The idea is disciple making. Making disciples that make disciples that make disciples that make disciples. Teaching others to teach. Training others to train. The whole idea is it's not just a one-on-one linear relationship, it's teaching others to exponentially increase the knowledge of God so that those would go forth and make disciples. Teach them to command all that the Lord has commanded.

Disciple making disciples. This was Timothy's mission. As a church we have wanted to follow that same mission. It includes passing on what he had learned. For Timothy, this required being strong in grace. What is he passing on? The teaching that you have received. Paul had taught Timothy. Timothy's mother and grandmother had taught Timothy. And it's possible that the witnesses that Paul is talking about refers to those who had contact with Paul and Timothy and were a conduit of additional information. So Timothy is a repository of biblical truth. He is a storehouse. He is the Costco, if you will, of biblical data. Many people have poured into him. He knows the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He knows the testimony of Christ and he knows the implications of the Gospel to have on living righteously unto the Lord. His mind is locked and loaded with biblical truth. What an unbelievable catastrophe it would be if he kept that to himself. If he said, "Boy, this is fun. I've got a lot of information. I'm really good at Bible trivia." You know, Timothy would kill at Bible trivia. But what if that's all he used it for? What if he just kept it to himself? What a tragedy if the next generation did not learn what he had learned from the previous generation. Now it's Timothy's turn to take what he has learned and give it to others. The information is not to die with him.

Even our society gets this. If you're watching television, all you see, CNN was loaded with 70th anniversary stories of the Holocaust. They wanted to capture these stories so the information doesn't die out so it's not remembered. World War II vets, you want to record and listen to their stories before they die so you don't forget this amazing situation. Our society gets this, passing on information, not forgetting things of significance. It sounds simple, just pass on what you know. Every parent knows it's not that easy, right? Every teacher knows passing on what you know is not always easy. Just doing it is easier than teaching somebody else to do it, isn't it? In order to get this done, it requires a person strong in the grace of Jesus.

Let's keep going: whom. To whom is he to explain and refer the teaching that he has received? Well, to faithful men. That's what verse 2 says. The specific context refers to faithful men because it's in the context of one pastor writing to another pastor about training pastors. So the focus of the text is on leadership. This is good biblical reason for our seminary to exist. Our Masters in Divinity Program is designed to train faithful men who will then desire to serve in pastoral ministry. For anybody who doesn't even know how the program works, it's a 3 year program where you come in and serve as an intern and you have communicated a desire for pastoral ministry and you want the church to ultimately confirm your call if the Lord is ultimately going to use you because you have displayed the character of what is defined in Scripture. And the amazing part of the program is that the church – us, you – have supported the ministry so that the tuition is free which is amazing so that pastors aren't burdened by debt, by not seeing their family and by not having practical ministry training. That's the whole idea of the program.

But seminary is not free. It will cost you. I can attest to that. It will force you to focus, to be intense about a few things and have to purposely reject and avoid and not entangle yourself with other things. It's really about the local church identifying and training faithful men just as Paul instructed Timothy and it's a joy to be a part and be a recipient of the local church wanting to take 2 Timothy 2 and apply it. It's also a joy to see that a number of people who have gone through the program have then confirmed their call and serve right here amongst our congregation. Myself, Johnny K., Josh G., And Nick L. And it's become a crucial part of our mission strategy as we have a global outreach. So I just want to say thank you because I have been blessed by you so much and in so many ways and because you are faithful in what Timothy was being faithful to as well.

But what's the purpose? Again, so they can teach others. I mean, just think about the other men who the Lord has gone through the program. Think about Sasha M. in Brazil. Think about him just being a leader in the biblical counseling movement. Josh N. down in the Harvest. A number of other seminary grads in Harvest churches. Justin H. in Africa and Brad F. in England. I mean, the Lord is multiplying disciple makers and we get to be a part of it.

And good news, on Monday, we just found out that our seminary was moved from applicant status of being accredited to candidate status of being accredited. That was a big deal. Ultimately in the next 3 or 4 years, we may be accredited. Why? What's the point of doing that? We want to ensure that we're doing all that we can to train others well and we need to be strong in grace to do that. I would encourage you to pray for Pastor Aucoin and Pastor Green. They carry the primary ministry load in teaching at the seminary. It is a huge task. They are very gifted and very good but it is incredibly challenging so I would really encourage you to pray for them.

But there is so much more application here than just being thankful for the seminary that the Lord allowed us to have as a church family. It's more than just praying for those involved in the seminary. To some degree or other, all of us are training the next generation. All of us have a responsibility as parents, as grandparents, as disciple makers, as friends, as teachers, to pass on what we have learned to the next generation. Older ladies are supposed to teach younger ladies. Parents are supposed to teach all the time. And teachers are to teach in season and out of season. The last thing that we want is a repeat of Judges 2:10. If you've read Judges chapter 2, the very end has an ominous quote that says, "That generation no longer knew the Lord and did not know what the Lord had done for Israel." One generation. I mean, can you just sit down and some of this next generation of Israelites would be like, "You don't know about the frogs? You don't know about the Red Sea being divided? You don't know about the manna? The water from the rock? You don't know about hail from heaven coming down? You don't know about the firstborn dying? You don't know this stuff? What do you know, kid? This is our nation's history of why we're rescued from slavery." And they didn't know.

But that should lead us to look at our children and say, "What about the cross? Do you know what he did at the empty tomb? Do you know about grace? How beautiful it is? And how many different emphases there are that we need to think about and meditate on every day? What do you know? What do you know?" It only takes one generation to forget and sometimes even less than that. In this sense we should pray for each other. We should pray that we would parent our children, our grandchildren, the children in children's ministries, that we would be strong in the grace of the Lord Jesus to accomplish this amazing task because it can be so quickly forgotten. I would encourage you to ask one another if you have children, ask other parents, "How are you doing? How can I pray for you? I know the challenges I have, how are you doing?" and then tell them how they can pray for you as well because it is a monumental task to teach the next generation.

In addition to passing on what we have learned, the text continues that we need to be strong in the grace for another aspect of our mission: to please your Lord in the face of possible suffering. 2 Timothy 2:3, "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. Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules." A second clear issue needing strength and God's grace is the ability to please the Lord no matter what we might face. To please the Lord no matter what. In this passage, much like the one Pastor Viars spoke from, the focus is on pleasing the Lord, not necessarily only the suffering. Don't become a professional thorn describer. Those words haunt me because I'm very, very acutely aware of the challenging circumstances and I can just inspect them and not inspect what the grace I need to please my Master.

In this context, we see Paul using soldier, athlete, farmer as illustrations to make the point that grace is needed because there is hardship, there is discipline, there is focus, there is intensity that you need for the mission God has given for you. It is difficult and challenging and you need him. There are several means by which we can please the Lord in this passage by responding well to suffering. Ultimately, Paul tells us, "Suffer hardship with me." No doubt, historically speaking, there is plenty of suffering to go around. Paul doesn't sugarcoat it. "Follow me. Life is going to be really, really easy." Historically speaking, there is plenty of suffering to go around. Do you know that virtually all of the apostles and most of the early church leaders were martyred? Were killed for their faith? "Follow me, you're probably going to die. Follow me." Rather than back down from it or try to hide it from Timothy, he says, "Suffer hardship with me as a fellow soldier. Face it. Endure it with me. You're going to need strength."

So that's the first metaphor: soldiers. Soldiers suffer. Soldiers have it difficult. It was true back then and it's true today whether it be the bitter cold, the intense heat, not having showers or cleanliness or no comfort or having an intense period of waiting and then intense periods of opposition and danger. Suffering is part and parcel with being a soldier. A soldier of Jesus Christ must be prepared to suffer all sorts of various trials. It's possible to do this not only because God's grace is sufficient but God's grace can strengthen us to be strong in the face of trials such that that strength results in joy, exulting. James teaches to count suffering as joy. Or Romans 5 teaches to exult in suffering. It's possible that God can strengthen you enough to actually have joy, to have grace; to have joy and exultation in the midst of hardship because that glorifies God and shows how powerful his grace is. In other words, whatever level of suffering we will face or have faced, there is grace for that.

Not only do we please our Lord by handling suffering well but we also please him by not being focused on affairs unrelated to your mission. 2 Timothy 2:4 says, "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." There are so many things that desire our attention. So many things cry out, "Look at me. Think about me. Invest in me." I'm not talking about not maintaining your car, not getting groceries, not doing tasks and responsibilities you have but if we're honest, there are so many things that can distract us and we get very attracted to them. There is a sense of joy and pleasure in all kinds of worldly things and so often we don't think about hating sin, we think, "How close we can get to it? And how many things can distract me from my mission of pleasing the Lord? And how close can I get to it?" As you get distracted from your mission of pleasing the Lord, living for him, glorifying him exalting him, as you get distracted with unrelated affairs to that mission, you become enslaved or entangled, controlled. It's all you can think about and not think about the mission that God has for you to glorify him on this earth while you have the time.

The book of 2 Timothy gives a lot of illustrations of people who lost their focus and the mission is becoming distant and they are more excited about other things. In 2 Timothy 1:15 he says, "You are aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes." By name, here are people I'm concerned about you not going down the same path. 2 Timothy 4:9-10, "Make every effort to come to me soon; for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me." Paul is concerned about this because martyrs are not the only casualties of war. There are deserters as well. People fall by the wayside. People who were once strong in the Lord focused, intense, determined, are now casualties of the world because they have been distracted and enslaved. They drifted slowly like Demas, slowly drifting away from the things of the Lord and drifting towards the things of the world. They hung out more in that mind space than focusing on their mission. Something else in the mission took more precedent.

Here's one of my points: all of us are susceptible to that experience, being enticed and distracted. We know because almost every person in this room could name at least one person who has drifted away from the Lord. They were once strong but slowly but surely they moved away. This is a warning. "Be strong. You need to be dependent. You need grace not to do that. And God supplies the grace so that you can see the dangers coming and refuse to give the time, the energy, the devotion to things that just simply distract you from your mission." Instead we need to focus on the mission of pleasing our Lord and we do that by focusing on the Commander's instructions and goals, focusing on what the Commander wants. That's where the soldier illustration becomes so powerful. It's what's the command structure? What does the Master want? What does the leader want? That's why the training a soldier goes through is hard. It requires discipline. It requires honing your focus to complete the mission that your commander gives you.

In Paul's day, the Roman army marched in lines and when they marched at people, people shot things at them like arrows and spears and javelins and rocks and all these things, right? They had to learn to stay in formation. It was actually the safest place for everyone. But try telling that to someone when 500 arrows are bearing down on them. The safest place is out of range. But the Master says, "No, focus on the mission I give you."

Or think about the Civil War, marching in line over ground as people shot you. That would require a fair bit of focus and commitment to the instructions you were given. You would have to have a great level of desire to please your commander who said, "Go and walk toward those people who are shooting at you." You have to believe that the mission is crucial. It's important, even worth your life.

Think about today's modern boot camp where people go to it and get yelled at. It's not simply to flaunt the authority of the drill instructor, it's trying to provide the soldiers the best possible chance of survival, for everyone to focus on the mission together. New recruits come in with all sorts of hobbies and desires. They've got their Xbox. They've got their time to hang with friends. They've got their sports. They've got their music. They've got their TV. They had 100 different things taking their attention and now they must be taught discipline and focus so that they don't die.

Paul uses that imagery and that importance for the Christian life. The Lord has given us a mission and a purpose of pleasing him, pleasing the one who drafted us into his army. "I'm in the Lord's army." Should we sing it together? Yes, sir. Yes, there it is. It's a cute song for kids to sing but it's a truth that we need to think about that, "I'm in his army. He's my Commander. He has a mission for me," and we need to be disciplined and focused. What that means is you're going to care less about a great many things so that you can care more about the things that matter. As Paul writes to Timothy, he doesn't pretend this life is going to be easy but he puts it in the context of the Master's commands.

Finally, we also see that we please the Lord by competing according to the rules. 2 Timothy 2:5 says, "Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules." You see, Paul changes from a soldier to an athlete. All athletic competitions have rules. There are rules for training. There are rules for the event. This point might be very obvious but I want to suggest to you that sometimes people like to cheat. I'm trying to have self-control to not mention any specific sports teams or athletes. But, I mean, you click on the news and it is who has gotten caught using performance enhancing drugs now? Because who is the next person that's going to be caught? We like to cheat. We like to take shortcuts and cheating has its advantages, doesn't it? It makes it easier. How many of you have run around the track in high school thinking to yourself, "If I just cut the ends off of it, would they see? If I just kind of ran right across instead of going around the curve? What if I only had to run 3 laps and you ran 4? I would probably be more likely to win." We like to cheat because it's easier. It's harder and more difficult to compete according to the rules. Sometimes that's how believers want to function in the Christian life. We want to find a shortcut that we think is going to be best.

There are some clear rules, if you will, to the Christian life. Here's one: you can't do it on your own. We just think it's going to be easier if I just do it all by myself. I'm dependent on the strength God has provided and I need others to help me. Another rule is that you can't go through the Christian life without recognizing that you might experience suffering. You can't eliminate that. You can't choose a route that goes around suffering. Another aspect of the Christian life we can't avoid is that faithfulness is crucial to your development. You have to be faithful to a few things and not focus on a great number of things so you can care a lot about what is most important and be faithful to what is most important. You need to be strong in the grace of the Lord Jesus in order to compete according to the rules.

Also, we need to be strong in the grace in order to focus on the glorious prize at the end. "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." Isn't it easy to focus on the here and now? Isn't it easy to focus on what's happening right now? "I just need to find my keys. I just need to get to work. I just need to answer this email because it's really important and if I don't do it, everything will fall apart." The Bible in general and this passage particularly, calls us to lift our eyes toward heaven, not simply be consumed with what's going on right in the moment and that's hard to have that dual focus of letting the moment direct your eyes to heaven. But think about the hard-working farmer. Think about the athlete who is focused on the prize at the end, who is focused on the crops at the end. But if you compete as an athlete, you have to do it according to the rules.

"The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops." Because the prize goes to the winner. The prize is the focus of competing according to the rules, of running the race, of focusing on the prize at the end. No shortcuts. No detours. Just the mission, the race God has laid out for us. The harvest goes to the farmer.

Ultimately, this is the final metaphor: the hard-working farmer is the first to collect his harvest. Yes, there will be trials. There will be struggles. There will be a war. We're constantly at war. But the one who sows the seed reaps the harvest. The farmer gets to enjoy the fruits of his labors. Living with mission and purpose, it's not hard to understand, but it is incredibly difficult. It is going to require the strength that the Lord provides through the grace of Christ.

Be strong in the grace of the Lord. We are all going to need his grace.

Let's pray.

*Lord, we come before you recognizing our need and our dependence. Lord, we recognize that we need to hunger and thirst for your righteousness and we need your help to supply our every need. Lord, as we prepare our hearts to worship you, to partake in the Lord's Table, as we reflect on the grace that we need to be strong to accomplish the mission you have for us that includes suffering, that includes a focus on pleasing you as our Commander, on focusing on the prize, on not being distracted by this world, Lord, we recognize this is a tall order and we are in need of your grace. Help us now understand the depth of your grace, understand how we need to hunger and thirst for you and help us prepare our hearts to remember your great sacrifice. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*