

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

2025, in the Rearview Mirror

(2 Timothy 2:1-6)

Introduction: 2025 will be a good year, if...

Here's to hoping that you had a wonderful Christmas season and day, and that you will have a very Happy New Year!

As we approach January 1, 2025, I have a question for you. What would it take for you to be able to look back on December 31, 2025, and be satisfied that it had been a great year?

What would it take for you to be able to say,
"This was the year I wanted it to be. I've gotten a handle on my budget. I am living within my means. I've got my diet and exercise dialed in. I've spent lots of quality time with loved ones and am now fluent in Spanish. It was a great year."

For many of us, any of those accomplishments would represent huge victories. To make progress in the financial and career arenas, personal health, relationships, and learning new things would be great.

But, if that was it, if these were the only gains, if all of that summed up your 2025, would that be enough?

What if you had accomplished all of that, but in the 365 days of 2025 you had not taken many next steps with Jesus? Or what if you had taken a few spiritual next steps, yourself, but hadn't helped anyone else take their next steps?

What is obvious is that a lot of progress in a lot of things WITHOUT growing in Jesus or helping others grow in Jesus would NOT

a great year make. Of necessity, a year well-lived must be marked by spiritual progress.

So today, right before the launch of a new year, we're going to think beyond diet and exercise, beyond finances and language acquisition.

We're going to set our sights high, raise the bar, shoot for the moon, and imagine a year that finds us majoring on the life of faith.

As we think about 2025 being a banner year, spiritually speaking, I present for your consideration the role model of the Emperor Penguin.

The magic of mentoring...

The Emperor Penguin (the largest of the penguin species) survives in earth's harshest climate, the Antarctic.

Once it reaches maturity, each penguin has to be tough. They each have to take care of themselves. They each dive deep into the ocean to find fish to eat. They put on as much weight as possible to survive frigid temperatures and hurricane-force winds.

A penguin survives by paying attention to its needs.

But Emperor Penguins are remarkable for their instinctive determination to also care for their young so that they live into adulthood.

The female and the male pair work together to help their chick survive and thrive. But, after the two and a half months of gestation is over and the egg is hatched, the mother penguin's work is done.

She then hands the egg off to her mate, who balances the egg on his feet - as he stands on the ice - for the next nine weeks, covering it with a God-designed pouch to keep that egg warm.

Mom and dad penguin work together to grow a family.¹

Then, when the mom returns, the whole community of Emperor penguins pitches in to keep each other alive in Antarctica.

Colonies of thousands of Emperor penguin dads and moms and chicks stand together on the ice. And to protect the chicks, the adults rotate taking turns on the perimeter of the colony - so that no penguin is on the perimeter for too long - protecting the chicks against the bitter weather.

Without the help of the adult penguins, the eggs and chicks wouldn't survive Antarctica.

The Emperor penguins model taking care of the next generation. They provide for and care for and protect the young. They train the young chicks in how to navigate the Antarctic world. They mentor the young.

The penguin and human worlds work because of the magic of mentoring. The more mature, having grown, help the less mature grow.

That's the way families thrive. That's also how businesses, sports teams, and schools thrive.

A physical therapist guides and mentors a patient recovering from surgery and help him to re-learn how to walk. A sponsor mentors the guy who is struggling with an addiction. The coach mentors a player who is learning a new position on the team. The boss helps the new employee learn the ropes in a new job.

In every arena of life, mentoring is crucial. And it is without question crucial in life with Jesus. I think that the Emperor penguin serves as a wonderful picture of a Jesus-honoring life.

Each Christian sees to it that he or she takes next steps with Jesus.

¹ Morgan Freeman says, anthropomorphically, in a 2005 documentary, *The March of the Penguins*, "Love finds a way."

And the believers in Jesus who have walked with Jesus for a while, help the newer believers survive and thrive in their faith.

So, for the next few minutes, let's think of our church as a recovery center, a team, a hospital where we each make progress in Jesus and then lend a hand to help someone else make progress.

Our Mission Statement...

Here at the start, and right before the beginning of a new year, let's review our church's Mission Statement.

We help you take next steps with Jesus...

...so that you can help others take next steps with Jesus.

There is a Part One of that statement. YOU take next steps with Jesus.

You commit to regular, consistent exposure to Scripture and to prayer. You share Jesus with a friend. You learn to live generously. You forge meaty relationships. You pursue holiness.

And there is a Part Two. YOU help someone else take next steps with Jesus.

Taking ownership for our own personal growth issues is critical. But it isn't Mission: Accomplished until we are on the giving end. And Jesus calls us all to Part One and to Part two.

Today, we'll consider a mentor / mentee (disciple / discipler) relationship that is described in the New Testament. It points the way forward for us, who want the same as we look forward to life in 2025.

In this relationship, the Apostle Paul is the mentor and Timothy is the mentee.

A living example of our Mission Statement

What we know about Timothy

Timothy lived in the Galatian city of Lystra. (Acts 16:1-3) The Apostle Paul met Timothy when he was traveling through Galatia, preaching the gospel of Jesus.

When they met, Timothy was a young man,² and Paul was impressed with him. Timothy was a solid guy and a strong Christian with a good reputation.

Timothy's father was a Greek, who was probably not a Christian. But Timothy's mother was a Jewish Christian who brought Timothy up to know Jesus. His grandmother, Lois, was also a Christian.³

Early on, Timothy's spiritual giftedness was recognized by church leaders. Prophetic utterances were spoken over him.⁴ Affirming hands were laid on him.⁵

What we know about Timothy, we know because of his long relationship with Paul.

Timothy's relationship with Paul

From the start of the second missionary journey,⁶ Timothy was one of Paul's closest traveling partners and co-workers in the gospel.

He traveled with Paul nearly everywhere he went with the gospel. They were together in Philippi⁷ and Corinth and Ephesus and Rome and Jerusalem.

² They first started working and traveling together on the Second Missionary Journey. Fifteen years later, Paul wrote to Timothy to let no one look down on him because of his youthfulness (1 Timothy 4:12), implying that he must have been *really* young when he started out with Paul.

³ Early on, Paul circumcised Timothy for the sake of the Jews, so that he would not be a stumbling block to them since he was, after all, half Jewish.

⁴ 1 Timothy 1:18; 4:14

⁵ When Paul wrote this letter (2 Timothy), we believe that Timothy was serving the church at Ephesus in a pastoral role.

⁶ The record of that trip begins at Acts 15:36.

And, of course, we have two personal letters that Paul wrote to Timothy that highlight Paul's mentoring role in Timothy's life.

Paul wrote the first letter (1 Timothy) to instruct Timothy in what was involved in serving as a church's shepherd / pastor.

He wrote the second letter (2 Timothy) from a Roman dungeon.⁸ We believe that it was the last letter Paul wrote before Rome killed him for his faith.⁹

So, what we read today in 2 Timothy, we read as Paul's final charge to his son in the faith, the passing of the torch of the faith from one generation to the next.

Our focus today is on a few verses in that second letter Paul wrote to Timothy. The passage begins with a strong exhortation to Timothy to move forward in his own personal walk with God.

Paul wanted Timothy to be always taking next steps with Jesus.

Take Next Steps (2:1)

[1] You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

If you thumb through the two letters Paul wrote to Timothy, you'll see how Paul defined being "***strong in grace.***"

It involved:

- growing in character. (1 Tim. 4:12; 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:20-26)
- developing his spiritual gifts. (1 Tim. 4:14-16; 2 Tim. 1:6-7, 14)
- leading a life filled of prayer. (1 Tim. 2:1-8)
- pursuing godliness. (1 Tim. 4:7-8)
- fighting the good fight of faith. (1 Tim. 1:19; 6:12)

⁷ The assumption is that while Timothy was in Philippi with Paul and Silas, he was not imprisoned as they were because of his youth.

⁸ This is not the "house arrest" in Rome that is mentioned at the end of Acts.

⁹ While he hoped that his friend, Timothy, would be able to visit him in Rome before he died, we don't know if he ever made it. (2 Timothy 4:21)

- being bold, not timid. (2 Tim. 1:8)
- teaching truth. (1 Tim. 1:3-4; 4:3; 2 Tim. 2:14-19; 4:1-2)
- doing the work of an evangelist. (2 Tim. 4:5)
- dealing wisely with older and younger men and women. (1 Tim. 5:1-16)
- honoring and holding accountable Elders. (1 Tim. 3; 5:17-22)
- affirming the goodness of enjoying God's good gifts. (1 Tim. 4:1-6)
- instructing the wealthy to store up treasure in heaven and to be generous. (1 Tim. 6:17-19)

By taking spiritual next steps, Timothy would make progress in the journey of growing ***“strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”***

And in the same way that Paul told Timothy to take these steps into growth, he would say the same thing to each of us today. Grow. Change what needs to be changed. Move forward in your spiritual life.

That's Part One. Now he addresses Part Two.

Help Others Take Next Steps

The Next-Step STRATEGY

[2] The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful people who will be able to teach others also.

Mentoring our way to the Great Commission

Timothy's story

We see five generations of Christ-followers in this one verse.

Truth was passed from *Jesus to Paul to Timothy*. Now, Timothy is to pass the truth on to other *faithful people*, who will keep spreading the word to *others*.¹⁰

Paul describes here the ages-long strategy of how the torch of the faith gets passed from one Christ-follower to another.

As Timothy had been taught, so he was to teach. As Timothy had seen the faith lived out by Paul, he was to live it out for others.

This model played out early in own my life with Jesus. Very soon after I came to faith, God brought into my life a few *Pauls* who helped me grow.

My story

I was in High School when I believed in Jesus for eternal life. The church youth group I was a part of was led by a group of men and women.

Three men - Bob, Dwain, and another Bob - made personal investments in me and the other guys in the group.

It was from those men that I learned about the strength that comes from Jesus-centered community, the joy of sharing my faith, the importance of Scripture, the primacy of prayer, and so much more.

In particular, Bob #1 met with me regularly. He mentored me. We read the Bible together and we prayed together. It was intensely personal. Bob helped me to grow as a Christian.

After a few months of meeting with me, Bob urged me - at this point, I had been a Christian for about a year - to help some of the younger guys in the youth group grow in Christ.

¹⁰ The most explicit application of this verse is that Timothy was to equip teachers to teach truth in a church and lead a congregation into maturity and health by feeding them that truth. This was and is today, crucial for any church.

So, I approached a couple of the younger guys and started to meet with them.

So, I was, first, one of Bob's "Timothys." Then I got to serve as a "Bob" for some other "Timothy's." - and that's the way it's been in the Jesus movement for two thousand years.

One Christ-follower pours into another, who pours into another and on and on and on it goes.¹¹

I'll bet you can name people who have made a difference in your life, for Jesus' sake. The process never stops.

Your story

Each one of us is a Timothy, always in need of some help from others to keep growing. Each of us can be a Paul to someone who can learn something from us that we have learned.

We all always need mentoring AND we can all find someone who is newer to the faith and less familiar with Jesus than we are. You have next steps to take AND there are people who need you to help them take next steps.

Now, here's where I want to stretch our thinking about helping someone else take their next step with Jesus.¹²

Who is in view?

People are at all stages of spiritual development

¹¹ Lots of people have provided me with mentoring in God-honoring life skills, marriage and parenting, counseling, leadership, preaching, generosity.

¹² What follows is the outworking of what has come to be known as "The Engels Scale" (from James Engels, a student of missions), a helpful way of looking at a person's movement from unbeliever, by stages, to disciple-maker. The Engels Scale provides a vision for each person moving toward maturity in Christ, recognizing that people move to maturity *by stages* (or *steps*). This way of looking at spiritual progress prompts us to think in terms of helping people make progress with activities, training, and service opportunities appropriate for each stage.

The people you know are at every imaginable place in their spiritual journey. Some are Christians, and some are not.

Of those who are Christians, some are vibrant and growing, some are brand-new to the faith, some are mature in the faith, and some are stuck.

Of those who don't know Jesus, some are interested in finding out about Him, some rarely ever think about God, some belong to other faiths, and some may be unfriendly to Christianity.

So...

...which of these people would not benefit from learning about Jesus?

...which of these people should we not tell about Jesus?

...which of your friends should you not help take a next step with Jesus?

Right. Everybody can take a next step with Jesus. And, in the circles in which you run, guess what? *"Tag. You're it."*

You may be the only ambassador for Jesus your friend knows.

All can take a next step with Jesus

Let's take, for example, someone you know who has not yet come to know Jesus. At this time, he doesn't know very much about Jesus. Can you help this friend take a next step with Jesus?

Sure. You can tell him what a difference Jesus is making in your life. You can pray for him. You can tell him what you know about Jesus: His love, His power, His commands.

I'm doing this with a couple of guys these days. With one I take hikes on a local trail. With another, I drink coffee at Starbucks.

These friends and I talk about Jesus. Sometimes we open a Bible. My prayer is that they will soon take some of the things we're talking about to heart, and that they start following Jesus.

Every "step" someone takes toward Jesus - learning about Him, even obeying His commands - is a step into discipleship.

My greatest hope and prayer is that having learned about Jesus, these friends will see the trustworthiness and the love of Jesus and will believe in Him for eternal life.¹³

From that point forward, every step they take toward maturity is a further step into discipleship.

You could help someone take a next step toward Jesus who doesn't know Him yet. You could help someone who is a younger Christian than you take a next step with Jesus.

When Jesus-followers like you help others take spiritual next steps, the Great Commission advances.

We are a part of a two-thousand years long "next step" pipeline

When you first started following Jesus, you were at the end of a long line of disciple-making disciples. Someone had poured their life into the life of that person who poured into the life of the person who poured into you.

Now, it is your turn to invest in someone, point them to Jesus, help a friend take a next step with Jesus.

Just think about how exciting it will be when you hear that the person into whose life you poured is now investing in someone else. Your *Timothy* has become someone else's *Paul*!

So, Paul has laid out the strategy for the progress of the faith in the first two verses of 2 Timothy 2. Take next steps. Help others take next steps.

It's simple. It isn't necessarily easy, but it is definitely not complicated. Follow Jesus. Bring someone else along with you.¹⁴

¹³ This is referred to as "discipling to conversion." It's what the apostles did, and it is what the Great Commission assumes we will do.

¹⁴ The first message I ever gave was on Grace Bible Church's annual Sunday evening "Youth service." I was a High School senior and spoke from 2 Timothy 2:1-6. I was captured by what Paul had to say then, because others had poured their lives into me, so I spoke about the blessing discipleship had been in my life.

Our passage for today concludes with a call to a certain way of living AS we carry out this strategy. We are to adopt the mindset of a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer.

First, the soldier.¹⁵

The Next-Step Mindset (2 Timothy 2:3-6)

Pleasing Jesus, our Enlisting Commander (vv. 3-4)

[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.

My father and my grandfather served in the US Army. I have not served in the military.

I have, though, served in San Antonio for a long time. So, I greatly appreciate the military and its culture by family legacy and by living in Military City, USA.

You don't have to attend very many promotion or retirement ceremonies to "get" that there is something very special about serving.

Soldiers understand loyalty in the service of country. And they understand that their service will often lead to suffering.

Paul called Timothy to be willing to endure hardship in serving Jesus. That call goes out to every Paul and Timothy here today.

And Paul understood suffering. He had been there, done that. He suffered tremendously in service to Jesus, was in a Roman dungeon as he wrote this letter, and was put to death shortly after hitting "send."

¹⁵ We don't use often militaristic language to describe following Jesus these days because we don't want to be misunderstood. There is no sense in which Jesus calls us to violence.

But nothing meant more to Paul than pleasing his Savior, the One who enlisted him in service.

Jesus went to the cross for him. So, of course he was willing to suffer for Jesus.

In the days ahead, you'll be giving yourself to service. You'll pass a faith baton to a friend. You'll pour your life into someone who needs time, attention, care, resources.

In lots of what we do as disciples, we serve others. Ultimately, though, we're serving Jesus.

This service stuff will sometimes be challenging. It won't always turn out well. There will be losses along the way, and we won't always see how the story turns out. Service costs.

But there is the promise that if we give ourselves to passing on the torch of the faith, we have pleased Jesus.

As you sit, exhausted at the end of a day after having served someone in His Name, picture your Savior / Commander breaking into a big grin and shouting a thunderous, *"Well done!"*

Keep pressing Jesus into the lives of your friends. Keep helping those around you take next steps. Jesus loves it when you do that. Soldier on. And play hard.

Competing to win the prize (v. 5)

[5] Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules.

The next Olympics will be the Winter Games set to take place in Italy in 2026.

We'll watch athletes compete in sports for which they have been training for years. And they'll have to compete according to the rules of the game, whether the "game" is skiing or hockey, speed or figure skating, or (my favorite) curling.

If an athlete doesn't follow the rules, he or she will be disqualified.

So, too, Christians must live as Jesus calls us to live in the *game* of serving Jesus by helping others grow.

Paul says that in the race we run for Jesus, we don't win the prize unless we compete ***"according to the rules."***

As I understand this image, Paul is speaking to character and lifestyle. Purity and integrity. Courage and faithfulness. Love.

The manner in which we run / live is crucial to success in passing on the torch of the faith. If we run outside the lines of obedience and love, our torch-passing efforts will be tainted.

Plus, we'll be disqualified from receiving the prize Jesus wants to give us for faithful service in His Name - and Jesus does so want to reward us for faithfully running the race!

In some places in today's world, where Jesus-following is not esteemed, those who serve Him won't receive public recognition or affirmation. No prize at all. Not now. Not here.

We saw that a few Sundays ago when we observed the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

But even for us, the awards ceremony won't be complete here and now.

The full prize will be awarded later by the Judge, our Savior, Jesus. You have that to look forward to when you give your life to passing the faith baton.

The images of being a soldier who brings a smile to his Commander's face and an athlete who wins a prize are compelling.

Paul concludes with the equally compelling image of the hard-working farmer.

Working hard to receive a share of the harvest)(v. 6)

[6] The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops.

Picture a farmer. He's plowing his field, fertilizing it with good manure, planting seed, pulling weeds, watering when it doesn't rain.

And yes, I've got a garden, which I thoroughly enjoy. I've got winter veggies growing strong. I'm eager to bring in enough greens for salads...but if things don't pan out in my garden, I've also got H-E-B.

The farmer Paul imagines here feeds his family by his labors in the field. He has no H-E-B fallback option. So, he farms wisely, diligently, patiently, perseveringly.

You and I are to imitate the farmer. Serve Jesus with diligence. Be the disciple Jesus saved you to be and invest in those around you.

Believe that God will bring about results from your spiritual seed-sowing. Pray fervently that God will bring about growth in the people you're serving in Jesus' Name.

And live with an expectation of the harvest of a GREAT 2025.

But even if they are not, this coming year will be a GREAT year for you if you take your own next steps with Jesus and help someone else do the same.

Conclusion:

I hope that budget keeping, fitness, healthy eating, and language acquisition - and more! - are all a part of your 2025.