

Life: The reward of endurance

February 8, 2013

• *This LifeWay Bible Study for Life lesson for Feb. 24 focuses on 2 Timothy 2:1-13*

Some cities have passed ordinances prohibiting large billboards on the highway, especially those that use flashing lights at night. Research shows these lights distract drivers and lead to accidents. People traveling fast on freeways must keep all their attention on the road to keep from injuring themselves or others.

Looking at the Apostle Paul's warnings to his young son in the faith, his writings read much like the ordinance against distracting signs. Paul warns Timothy to stay in his lane, as it were. There will be many opportunities to turn this way or that. Total focus on the gospel and Timothy's call to it will be his best spiritual compass when things get confusing.

It is interesting, however, that many of these distractions won't come from the world outside the faith community. Read the entire text again, and count the number of times Paul warns about how those who distracted him came from within the church, not outside it. Paul passes this lesson along to Timothy.

If you visit with people who left the faith and inquire about the reasons, more often than not, it is because of the way so-called Christians treated or misled them. "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:23-25). We are far more likely than not to encounter these petty arguments within

the family of believers.

This does not mean there are not external distractions. Yet even those come from within. “Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22).

This passage is a reminder of the warning of James in his epistle: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” (James 4:1). It is so easy to blame the “lost” world around us for the temptations we face or the attempts to destroy our faith. In fact, the early Christians were mature enough to recognize that, when we face temptation, it is because of the weakness of our own humanity. Becoming a Christian does not release us from the responsibility to think intentionally about how we live or the direction of our lives. In fact, it only intensifies it.

Paul, as he was nearing the end of his own life, was exploring this fantastic mystery of the Christian faith. God is intending to redeem the lost. For reasons only God knows, God has engaged and called us to participate in that process. God could have waved a magic wand from heaven and completely accomplished the work of redemption. Instead, God called people like Paul, Timothy and you and me to be a part of that process. It is a wonderful, mysterious and challenging call. That call also demands at least two things.

First, we must keep our call in Christ in the forefront of our thinking. It must be the compass that guides our lives. Whether we are at work or play, at the grocery store or interacting with neighbors, our call in Christ should be the dominant force directing our lives.

Second, we must be careful not to let lesser callings distract us from that calling. Calamity waits if we do. When I was in high school, I worked for a

cotton farmer. One day, I was transferring a tractor from one location to another. I was driving down the road at full speed and decided to look back to make sure no one was behind me. When I did, I accidentally turned the wheel, went across a ditch and plowed into another farmer's field, destroying several rows of his freshly planted crop.

Since that day, never I have forgotten the words of Jesus recorded in Luke 9:62: "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." The kingdom of God is not underserved because too few are called to serve. It is underserved because too many of the called are distracted by lesser things.

A great text with which to end this study would be 2 Timothy 2:13: "If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself." There is more truth in that one verse of Scripture than we can unpack in a lifetime. There also is great assurance that, even in our stumbling and falling, our distractions and driving off the road, the One who called us still is faithful to us, to call us back and restore us to that which is our true purpose for living.