

“BE STRENGTHENED BY THE GRACE”
(Raising Leaders)

2 Timothy 2:1–2

Key Verse: 2:1

“You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus...”

Happy New Year! It's 2026! We all want to improve, right? So we make New Year's resolutions. We want to be more disciplined, to get better at life. In today's verses we find how we all can improve and grow *spiritually*. But it's not about our resolutions, our effort, or our willpower—it's about grace. What is this grace? Let's dig deep today and find out. What does it mean to “be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus”? And why is this the key for living, both personally and in helping others? May God speak to us through his word.

In the Bible, 2 Timothy is Paul's very last letter. He wrote it in prison, just before he was executed. He was writing to Timothy, the young man he'd been mentoring for years. To begin, Paul said he remembered Timothy constantly in his prayers night and day (1:3b). Then he reminds Timothy of his origins and of the challenges he'll face after Paul is gone. Now in 2:1 Paul begins by calling Timothy “my child.” He shares with him the true source of spiritual success. Read verse 1. At first it may sound like just human advice. We tend to take grace for granted. But for Paul, grace is the greatest spiritual secret, not just for Christian living but also for leadership. Paul is about to depart to heaven, and Timothy has some big shoes to fill. How can he possibly do it? Read verse 1 again.

The NIV says “be strong.” But in Greek the verb is passive—it says “be strengthened.” We can't make ourselves strong in grace; we have to *allow his grace* to strengthen us. “Strengthen” in Greek is our word “dynamo.” It's like drawing on a fully charged battery, ready to go at full capacity. And this is not just grace generally; Paul calls it “the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” What is this grace? Recently a scholar found six common ways the ancient world viewed

grace,¹ such as “superabundance” and “priority.” But the most revolutionary, mind-blowing aspect of grace—the one Paul zeroed in on—is grace that’s “incongruous.” What is *that*? It’s a beautiful gift given to the totally unworthy. It’s what Paul always meant by the grace of Jesus. But in his time, this concept of grace blew the roof off its common understandings. Giving grace like this is so undeserved, so completely unearned, it seems outrageously unfair. And what does “incongruous” mean? It means a radical mismatch. It just doesn’t fit. It’s weird. In fact, it’s scandalous! Paul described it in very personal terms: “...formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim.1:13–14). Due to his own violent, arrogant past, bullying weak people, Paul knew he could never deserve even to be Jesus’ slave. It’s still the greatest paradox, and the greatest irony: The grace in Christ Jesus is truly received by those who are sure they deserve it the least.

Why is this unfitting, outrageous grace in Jesus essential for us? Because it restores our relationship with God. There were glimpses of this grace in Jesus’ earthly ministry. He welcomed unacceptable tax collectors and sinners to himself, making the religious leaders furious. But fully restoring our relationship with God involved way more than just a few dinner parties with undesirables. God is more holy than we realize. And we are more sinful than we realize. God is so compassionate and gracious. But God cannot “just forgive” our unforgivable sins and retain his own holiness and justice. So he sent his own sinless Son in human form to be crucified. On the cross, Jesus took the punishment our sins deserve. It’s called “propitiation,” which simply means “turning away wrath.” On the cross, Jesus turned God’s wrath away from us who believe in him. Just think about that.

Through the mocking, the beating, his bruises, lashes, wounds, and precious blood poured out for us, God can give his grace to anyone, even the worst of sinners. This is a grace we could never deserve, and never, ever earn. The brief poetry of an old hymn sums it up: “Guilty, vile, and helpless we; Spotless Lamb of God was he. ‘Full atonement’—can it be? Hallelujah! What a Savior!” (Verse 3, *Hallelujah! What a Savior!* Philip P. Bliss, 1875)

¹ John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), pp.1–18.

This grace in Christ Jesus transforms our relationship with God. If we put our faith in what he did on the cross for us, God “counts” Christ’s righteousness to us. The Greek word for “counts” is “imputes,” and it’s used in Romans chapter 4 eleven times. It means God credits the perfect life and obedience of Jesus to our account. Really? What does that even mean? It means God not only wipes out our huge spiritual debts; he also credits us with every spiritual blessing in Christ as his own dearly loved children, more abundantly than all we could ever ask or think (Eph.1:3; 3:20). But how? Paul writes: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor.5:21). It’s way too good to believe, but it’s true.

The grace that is in Christ Jesus isn’t just a concept: it’s spiritual dynamite. It breaks through the hardest heart, breaks down all human hierarchies, and puts us all on a level playing field, as recipients of the same undeserved grace. Jesus’ grace is also like a spiritual dynamo that recharges even the most worn out, discouraged servant. Wherever we’re at in life, we can always come to Jesus by faith and ask him to renew his grace in our soul. Whenever we “hit the refresh button” on his grace to us, through faith, we receive a renewed strength we never imagined we could have, and a renewed heart for one another.

But we get stuck in the “transaction” mentality. What’s *that*? It’s always, “I did this, so I deserve that,” and “You did that, so you deserve this.” It makes us fall into self-condemnation if we fail, or self-righteousness if we succeed, and into the same crippled mentality toward one another. If we work hard, we think we deserve a vacation. If I do a menial task, like walk the dog or take out the garbage, I feel entitled to breakfast. If I show up to meetings on time and listen carefully to everybody, I think I can look down on the coworker who can’t do that.

But Paul didn’t think transactionally. He worked so hard for Jesus but said it was only by his grace (1 Cor.15:10). After his mission journeys, planting churches and suffering more than anybody for Jesus, he didn’t think he deserved anything. He knew he was still the foremost of sinners (1 Tim.1:15). He knew it was only the grace of our Lord that overflowed for him, with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. This grace freed him from needing honor or appreciation—he was free to just do his duty. It also freed him as a former Pharisee to truly love as brothers the Gentile sinners who trusted in Jesus. This grace made Paul like the unworthy servants in one of Jesus’ parables (Luke

17:7–10). In Greek, “unworthy” means “not even needed”—having no claim on God at all. Being aware of his grace becomes our strength and inspiration to keep serving, no matter what people say, think, or do.

Still, grace may seem weak. Giving people what they deserve feels strong. But God’s grace in Christ Jesus is not weak. It’s so strong, it can bring us all the way home. Reformation leaders called it “the golden chain of grace,” based on Romans 8:29–30: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Each term is like a golden link in a beautiful chain let down from heaven by God to us, in totally mismatched grace. The chain is matchless in beauty. In our sin we’re wretched, weak and broken. But *his grace* initiated his work in our lives, *his grace* called us out of unbelief, *his grace alone* justifies and ultimately glorifies us. This beautiful, golden chain is held together by the power of his grace, not by our performance. As we become confident in his chain of grace, it strengthens us more than we know.

But when we’re immature in our faith in Christ, we have high expectations. Once we get the facts on people, we label and dismiss them. And we tune them out. Our first impulse is always to teach. And we’re quick to dig out others’ faults. With this habit, we can’t build each other up. What’s worse? We never get truly close to anyone—not our spouse, not our children, not even those who may want to be our friends. Some will object, saying, “But people need to hear the truth!” Well, who knows better how to help people than our Lord Jesus? And in John’s Gospel, the only person Jesus began speaking tough truth to was the self-righteous, fake Pharisee, Nicodemus; with most ordinary, struggling sinners Jesus would begin full of grace. Constantly teachy, judgmental people are not strong—they’re weak. It’s a tragedy: so many people diligently attend church their entire lives and never make any real friends. Why not? Because they didn’t let their hearts get changed and recharged by the grace of Jesus. What people need most is grace, from Jesus, and from us.

Read verse 2. Here, the operative word is “faithful.” But in light of the incongruous grace of Jesus, who deserves this label of “faithful”? From God’s point of view, no one but God himself (Rom.3:3–4,10). Faithfulness here is not about our perfection; it’s about our posture. In this context, a faithful person is

not the one with the human willpower and strength to never miss “whatever”; it’s the one who refuses to move away from the grace of Jesus. It’s **not** the one who never messes up; it’s the one who constantly depends on what Jesus has done on the cross. It’s the one so humbled by the grace of Jesus that he won’t ever change the message. Only the person who fully trusts the grace of Jesus can be a reliable steward of his grace, because she’s so aware she has nothing to offer on her own. Such a person keeps on serving as an unworthy servant simply because he or she loves the Master, the Giver of the greatest gift of grace.

So verse 2 is saying it’s only the grace of Jesus that includes us in God’s history. This grace is not our original idea. It’s the grace embodied in Christ Jesus, the grace he gave his unworthy servant Paul, the grace Paul passed on to Timothy, and the grace Timothy was to pass on to those ready to rely fully on it. As we are strengthened by this grace, we pass on this grace, and we become one small part of his spiritual history, this spiritual relay race.

Paul had many methods of raising leaders. He shared his life with them. He brought them with him while he was teaching. He set a good example in prayer, humility, and loving service. But today’s verses show that most of all, Paul didn’t crush potential leaders with demands and expectations. He helped them taste the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And he helped them be strengthened by that grace. We all need faith to really do that.

So, what should we do? First, we need to come to Jesus as unworthy servants relying only on his grace. We need to cry out to him to strengthen us with his grace. As he does, we need to deeply repent of labeling and dismissing each other. We need to learn to see each other with “grace-healed eyes.” We need to see everybody around us with his love, as brothers and sisters for whom Christ died (Rom.14:15b; 1 Cor.8:11). It starts with our spouse and family members, continues to those in our church community, and reaches out to those in the non-believing world. His grace is the sparkling spring for all the other godly virtues we so desperately need each and every day. If our hearts are not strengthened by the grace of Jesus, we won’t have any real love for anyone. And that will make our evangelism, disciple-making, and missionary work fake.

In 2026, let’s ask God to help us stop being teachy and judgmental, and instead be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus. May God use us all

to build up spiritual leaders in this grace, who can pass on this most precious grace of Jesus to a new generation.