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Series: Timothy's Charge  
Sermon: Endure Suffering

### II Timothy 4:5 (NRSV)

As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

### Romans 5:1-5 (NIV)

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

### SERMON

What is suffering? If you look it up in the dictionary, you find the word suffering to mean enduring, something painful to undergo, to tolerate, to experience harm, pain, loss, or penalty, to be at a disadvantage. It is almost always used as a negative. Nobody wants to suffer. There are those who seem to enjoy it, but I don't understand those people. Most everyone I know avoids suffering as much as possible. When I think of suffering, I generally think of those sufferings that have come from huge trials and tribulations. A prisoner in a work camp in Siberia suffers. A family filled with grief over the loss of a loved one suffers. The loss of a home to a tornado or fire results in suffering. I think of the big time stuff when it comes to suffering. But there are little sufferings that go on throughout our days. The fender bender at the corner, the baby who doesn't want to sleep at night, discovering you're out of toilet paper at the most inopportune time, the flat tire, rain when you don't want rain, playing beat the bank and losing. Coming home to a pet stain on the carpet - and you don't have pets. The list could go on and on about how we all suffer each and every day.

We are looking at Paul's last words to Timothy, his protégé. Paul, the great missionary for the gentiles, the main writer of our New Testament. In jail, awaiting his destiny. And he writes a letter to Timothy, and at the end, gives him four lines of advice. Four simple directives. Stay Sober. Endure Suffering. Do the Work of an Evangelist. Carry out Your Ministry Fully. Last week we looked at Staying Sober. Thank you for not sending hate mail. This week, Endure Suffering. Sounds like a good Mother's Day theme, does it not? She suffers. So today, what is the right way to suffer, and why would God ask us to Suffer?

For me, there is a difference between suffering and life's little annoyances. Suffering is the huge life threatening or serious situation and everything else is just plain life. You get the shopping cart with the shaky wheel? That's just life. We deal with it. You get too much dressing on your salad at the restaurant? That's just life. We deal with it. Sometimes I confuse the two. When I get a flat tire on the road, I could say that I'm suffering. Lord, I'm suffer. I could have missed that porcupine in the road. It's actually an annoyance, but while I'm changing that tire, I would say that I'm suffering. I need to just deal with it. I need to remind myself that suffering is different. Suffering is more monumental. To me, this is what suffering is: Suffering is the knowledge that life could and should be better. I don't know if that is how other people would describe it, but I would say that we suffer when we know that our situation could improve. Too many times I think I suffer when I really only have a little annoyance. And I hate to break it to you, but most of our days are filled with little annoyances. If we let each and every little annoyance drag us down, our lives are going to be miserable and just plain sad. Many times I let the most littlest thing get to me and I'll mope around because of something so insignificant in the scheme of life. We all know people like that, right? Where everyday it's something new and

they can't find happiness because life isn't 100% perfect. We have lost the ability to deal with it and we throw ourselves a little pity party because of some small inconvenience. There is a scale of suffering, from these trivial matters to the catastrophes - and I think some of us rank those little trivial matters as huge, blown out of proportion.

A farmer came to town and asked the owner of a restaurant if he could use a million frog legs. The restaurant owner was shocked and asked the man where he could get so many frog legs! The farmer replied, "There is a pond near my house that is full of frogs. Millions of them! They croak all during the night and are about to drive me crazy!" So the restaurant owner and the farmer made an agreement that the farmer would deliver the frogs to the restaurant five hundred at a time for the next several weeks. The first week, the farmer returned to the restaurant looking rather sheepish, with two scrawny little frogs. The restaurant owner said, "Well, where are all the frogs?" The embarrassed farmer said, "I was mistaken, there were only these two little frogs in the whole pond. But they sure were making a lot of noise!" Do you have some little annoyances that get blown out of proportion in your head? Take a good look at the big picture and put them into perspective.

Suffering is almost always relative. It's relative. If suffering is knowing that life could be better, then it is relative to what we know and live out. When it comes to pain, I think I can take a lot. I can get shots, poked and prodded and handle it without much strife. Except the dentist. I hate the dentist. For me, going to the dentist is supreme suffering. I complain and whine about our orthodontia witch doctors, but then I remember that only one in fifty people in the world get to go to the dentist. Here I am thinking that I'm suffering when there are countless others who aren't that lucky. Suffering is relative. I think that I'm suffering when I go to work. Not really, but some of us do. 40 hours a week? Oh my gosh, that is horrendous! I ran across a list of workplace conditions for one company back in 1870, just after Congress passed new "liberal" labor laws. "Notice: Staff members must be present between the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. on weekdays and only until noon on Saturday. Daily prayers will be held each morning in the main office with the clerical staff in attendance. A stove is provided for the clerical staff. Coal and wood must be kept in the locker. Each member of the staff should bring four pounds of coal each day during cold weather. No member of the staff may leave the room without permission. Calls of nature are permitted and the staff may use the garden below the second gate. Now that business hours have been reduced drastically, the partaking of food is allowed between 11:30 and noon, but work will not, on any account, cease. A new pencil sharpener is available on application to Mr. Smith. Management recognizes the generosity of the new labor laws, but will expect a much greater work output to compensate for these near utopian conditions." All of a sudden, my job doesn't look so bad. And that was a white collar job! Imagine what the real workers had to endure. I complain about a project or a little overtime! Suffering is relative. Those who worked on the railroad years ago, imagine how they would look at our current road crews. Pretty plush I would imagine. And if we got to look at what the working conditions would be like in a hundred years, I think we'd feel no pity or sympathy for what future generations would consider hard work. Suffering is relative. On the days that I think I have it rough, I have to remind myself, my life isn't that bad, matter of fact, most of the world's population of any time period would trade me in a heart beat. And if I thought I was suffering before, what would I say if I had the lot of most of the people on the planet? That is one unheard of benefit of being a pastor. I can put my life in perspective. I visit people in the hospital, yet I get to go home. I hear of tough times, and yet I have food on my table. I mourn with those who have loss. And yet I have my family. I don't enjoy it, but I get to participate in loving and caring ways to the sufferings of others, and a by-product is that I am thankful daily for the blessings I do have. Suffering is relative. We suffer when we think life could be better.

My last point is this: I believe that there are two types of sufferings in the world. Bad suffering and good suffering. Bad suffering is where there is no benefit from the pain and anguish. Where it looks like people suffering needlessly and without cause. Unfortunately, some of life has this type of suffering. I know of family members who suffered before they died. There was nothing to be gained by their pain. The people on welfare - two thirds of them are young children - it's not their fault that they go hungry. Those whose body is always in

anguish, refugees, people who are separated from their loved ones, there is suffering that goes on in this world and sometimes it is nothing short of faith that keeps them going. The courage that it takes to keep on keeping on is courage that I'd like to have - but you never know if you truly have it until you are tested. That's the bad kind of suffering, suffering that you can't really fix nor does it have a visible purpose. The good kind of suffering is the kind that takes you some place that you haven't been to before. It's the kind of suffering that has a purpose or it prepares you for something. College students suffer. They are preparing for their time in the real world. It wouldn't be fair to them to give them A's for little to no work. It was some time ago, Harvard University, a school full of prestige and very bright students, was under scrutiny for grade inflation. Yes, everyone probably deserved an A for their work, but 80% of one graduating class did so with honors. It's not honorable if it's guaranteed! Mothers in labor suffer! But there is a payoff. Ask a mother during labor if she is suffering, she'll tell you yes. Ask a mother after the delivery while she is holding the baby if she suffered, she'll still tell you...yes! But it was a good kind of suffering. The person doing a workout suffers on a treadmill. Trust me, that's suffering! But there is a hoped for payoff. You suffer through a sermon. Why? You hope for something good! You suffer at work. Why? To provide for your family. Paul told Timothy to endure suffering - the suffering that came with sharing the Gospel - there is a payoff at the end. Lives get changed. We have that kind of suffering in our scripture this morning. The writer in both books is Paul. And Paul suffered. He went through trials and tribulations that I would shutter from. He suffers! But he is not ashamed. It's a good kind of suffering. If suffering is knowing that life could be better, then he is not ashamed because of the positive result of his sufferings. He is helping to bring about the kingdom of God on Earth. There is purpose and cause with his chains and trials. The good kind of suffering produces perseverance. That produces character and that produces Hope. And hope does not disappoint.

This morning, ask yourself these questions. Are you suffering? I mean, are you really suffering or are you having just some mild annoyances? If they are just little annoyances, deal with them as such and move on. Don't let life's little hiccups destroy your happiness. Do you think you have a million frogs where there are only a couple? If you are suffering, take a look at the big picture and put them into perspective. We always tend to look at the people who have it better than we do, and we almost always forget that most of the world is worse off than we are. And finally, if you discover that you truly are suffering, find out if it is the bad or good kind. If it's the bad kind, all I can offer you is love and care and concern. You do not need to suffer alone. There are people who want to love you and be with you. Our congregation is ideally suited for that. I have had offers by people in our midst who wishes to care for those who need care. Please let someone know if you want help. And don't suffer for the sake of suffering. I remember a lady at a previous church, husband was using her as a punching bag. She would say, It's my lot, endure suffering. NO! Stop getting hit! God doesn't want you to stay in a suffering situation! That's not the good kind of suffering! NO! A martyr is someone who dies because of their faith - but it wasn't their idea to be a martyr in the first place - they didn't sign up for this willingly!

And if you discover that you have the good kind of suffering - a suffering for a cause or greater goal, remember that this suffering is only temporary and it is preparing you for the challenges and rewards ahead. That's what got Paul through his sufferings, knowing that his suffering was only temporary and the rewards were out of this world. Remember that your suffering leads to perseverance, perseverance leads to character, and character leads to hope. And that hope never disappoints. And the family of God said, AMEN.