

SERMON TITLE: "Developing Skill Strength for Life's Challenges"  
SERMON TEXT: 2 Timothy 3:10 – 4:5  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: January 26, 2020, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

On Thursday afternoon, some of you came here to the church to participate in a webinar meeting with our District Superintendent, Rev. Marv Vose. Hopefully, those of you who came found that meeting informative. And maybe some more of you might want to take advantage of such opportunities in the future. I've been dangling these webinar meetings in front of you lately in bulletins, newsletters, and emails. I know these United Methodist deliberations aren't everyone's cup of tea. But I'm hoping that those of you *who want to know more* will avail yourselves of these communication events where you can listen, ask questions, hear answers, and express opinions. To be skilled in the ministries of our Christian faith, it helps to practice these kinds of interchurch conversations.

In addition to the content of these sessions, there's also an opportunity to learn about new technologies that people are using now to connect with each other across distances. I think some of you are becoming interested in loading the Zoom meeting program on your own computer, so you can become a more-engaged participant in these events with your own up-close camera and microphone. For many of you, that probably sounds like scary mind-boggling techno babble. But it really is the way that our society is getting together these days--not just for church but in lots of jobs, classes, and other social activities.

Life is full of learning opportunities, isn't it? And in our rapidly changing world, it seems clear that we're in constant need of skill updates. We never know when life is going to throw us a curve. Whether that's a wonderfully positive opportunity, an excruciatingly difficult crisis, or just coping with the inevitable changes that will come our way, it really helps us to be as strong as possible. That's why, since this new year began, we've been talking about developing physical, spiritual, and relational

strength. And that's why, today, with the help of 2 Timothy, I want to talk with you about developing skill strength for life's challenges.

### **1—OBSERVING A MENTOR**

In this passage from 2 Timothy, we see several tips for developing our skill strength. The first of these is spelled out in chapter three, verses 10 through 12. There, the Apostle Paul, or a follower of his, wrote to young Timothy that he should develop his skills by observing a mentor. Because of the nature of Christian ministry, the writer of this letter indicated that Timothy should observe his teaching, his conduct, his aim in life, his faith, his patience, his love, and his steadfastness.

Whether we're first-century missionaries, modern-day preachers, or any other kind of person in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, the skills we need can often be observed in other people around us. Those skills can be spiritual and interpersonal. Or they can be technical—like how to repair an automobile, how to construct a house, how to cook a certain type of food, how to write a computer program, how to style hair, how to cross-country ski, or how to surgically remove an inflamed appendix. The skills we need might be abilities we'd use in a job or career, or they might be know-how that is most often applied at home—like how to change the furnace filters, how to manage the laundry for a family of five, how to soothe a baby to sleep, how to prepare your taxes, or how to care for an elderly and disabled loved one. All those skills have to be learned somehow, and one of the very best ways for us to learn those abilities is by observing a mentor.

As kids, this was the primary way in which we learned. We watched our parents and older siblings, and we mimicked what they did. But even now, as adults, we can still learn by observation. Maybe we have to seek out and find a mentor to show us what we want to learn, but there's usually someone who can do that. Bill Wade has told me that, before Christmas, he was going over to Wes Carlson's house quite often so Wes could show him how to make those little wooden Shaker boxes that

Wes makes so beautifully. By observing Wes, Bill was able to make several of those boxes for Christmas gifts for his family.

If you don't know someone that you can observe in person, maybe you can observe by watching the Home and Garden Network or *This Old House* on PBS. More and more I've come to appreciate all the "How-To" videos there are available on YouTube. That's a great resource to explain how to do specific things. You need to fix a drippy faucet? There's a YouTube video for that. You want to learn how to apply eyeliner makeup? There's a YouTube video for that too. Actually, there are probably 10,000 of them!

Even here at the church, if you want to learn how to do something, there's no way better than learning on the job by observing others. Whether the skill you observe is using the dishwasher, beekeeping, gardening, singing in the choir, teaching children's Sunday School, or repairing a hole in the ceiling, there is so much you can learn by observing. Over the past couple weeks, Steve Loy has been troubleshooting our church refrigerator's defective icemaker. His 12-year old daughter Ari has been with him during the process. What a great way for Ari to observe and learn the skills of appliance repair!

## **2—LEARN FROM BOOKS**

Our scripture from 2 Timothy gives us a second idea of how we might strengthen our skills for life's challenges. In chapter three, verses 15-17, the writer instructs Timothy to lean on the scriptures—the sacred, inspired, and useful writings. For Timothy, who was a young missionary, the scriptures were the book not only of his personal faith, but also the handbook of his profession.

While I certainly encourage all of you to use God's holy word for developing your spiritual strength, I'm focusing today on other aspects of your Christian life. What books, manuals, and journals do you need to read in order to be skilled at your job? And by that, I don't mean only your current job, as it is today, but also how your career might evolve. As so many learned in the recession that began in 2008, we also have to be ready for the next job, which might be in a completely different field—because

we never know when this one might cease to exist. These days, industry is being disrupted all the time with new technology. So what books do we need to read for that future possibility? Most of us recognize that book learning is essential for college students. But, if our skills are going to be strong for life's challenges, we have to keep on reading—even when we're in the middle or end of our careers.

Of course, developing our skills through books isn't only for employment purposes. We also need to develop strong skills for other aspects of our life. Just the other night in a church meeting, I heard one of our dads recommend a book called *Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters*. What dad or mom doesn't need to strengthen their parenting skills? In this age of rapid change, who doesn't need to read articles on the internet and in magazines so you can keep up with all that's going on with online banking and bill paying, real estate trends, or medical issues? Read, read, read. And if looking at words on a page is hard for you, get audio books and podcasts and listen, listen, listen. From expert, reputable, and dependable sources, there is a lot of wisdom to gain that will help us develop skill strength for life's challenges.

### **3—BE PERSISTENT**

This scripture passage gives us a third means of developing our skill strength. We see this in chapter four, verses one through five. In that section, the writer is urging the young pastor Timothy to be persistent. Building up our skills isn't easy. It involves hard work, endurance, and suffering. If we really want to increase our ability, the writer of this letter says that we have to practice a lot. We don't do that just when "the time is favorable", but also when it's "unfavorable." We have to be patient and not give up. We have to give our full attention to this task of developing our skills. We can't be distracted by silliness and falsehood. We have to be sober in body and mind so that we can develop our skills fully.

Some years ago there was a popular saying that to become an expert at anything, you had to put in at least 10,000 hours at it. On average, when a person had practiced that much, they supposedly

knew what they were doing. These verses also remind me of a time I went to see a financial advisor. He drew me a U-curve and said it doesn't matter whether the stock market is up or it's down. If you invest in the market every month for years, you'll get both the advantage of bargain basement sale prices and the advantage of increasing gains on your account. Becoming strong in our skills isn't about finding the one perfect time to do something nearly as much as it is just doing it over and over again, persistently, until we gain the skill strength we need for life's challenges.

### **CONCLUSION**

A couple days ago, an advertisement popped up in my email for a free online class that would be taught by N.T. Wright, the same Bible scholar and author of the book that some of us are studying on Friday mornings. So, I couldn't pass up the offer. I had to check it out. Of course, they weren't just offering a free class by a famous scholar for no reason. The company\* offering the online class was drumming up business for other classes that probably would have some cost.

In the interest of their business model, I was asked to answer some standard questions. Listen to the way they worded them:

- Are you learning so you can start a new business someday?
- Are you learning so you can solve a specific challenge at work by learning a new skill?
- Are you learning so you can improve an existing skill?
- Are you learning so you can gain a missing skill to re-enter the workforce or change careers?
- Or, None of the above.

Since this was the week I planned to preach this sermon on developing our skills, I thought that was pretty neat. Right there, on an online class website, were these questions about new skills, existing skills, and missing skills. So, I'll turn those questions to you. What skills do you need to learn? By observing, by reading, or by persisting—how will you go about developing your skill strength for life's challenges?

\* [www.udemy.com](http://www.udemy.com)