

Fight the Good Fight

1 Timothy 1:18-20

“The pirate Gibbs, whose name was for many years a terror to commerce with the West Indies and South America, was at last taken captive, condemned and executed in the city of New York. He acknowledged before his death that when he committed the first murder and plundered the first ship, compunctions (anxiety from awareness of guilt)¹ were severe; conscience was on the rack and made a hell within his bosom. But after he had sailed for years under the black flag, his conscience became so hardened and blunted that he could rob a vessel and murder all its crew, and then lie down and sleep as sweetly at night as an infant in its cradle. His remorse diminished as his crimes increased.”²

If this does not convince you of the importance of a clear conscience, perhaps you have already gone the route of pirate Gibbs. Hopefully none of you have gone that far and will find what Paul has to say about **conscience** interesting as we close out the first chapter of 1 Timothy.

1 Timothy 1:18-20 (ESV):

¹⁸ *This **charge** I entrust to you, Timothy, my **child**, in accordance with the **prophecies** previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare,*

¹⁹ ***holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith,***

²⁰ *among whom are **Hymenaeus and Alexander**, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.*

There is an interesting use of language here in verse 18: The phrase, “*This charge*” brings to mind military imagery; whereas, in many other places the same word is translated “*command*” or “*instruct*.”

“This **charge**,” that Paul repeats here has reference to the same “**charge**,” “**instruction**” or “**command**” he mentions in verses 3 and 5, and that he details in verses 3 to 17. The Amplified Bible gives us the sense of this:

¹ Parentheses added.

² Tan, Paul Lee: Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations : *A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations for Pastors, Teachers and Christian Workers*. Garland TX : Bible Communications, 1996, c1979.

1 Timothy 1:3 AMP:

As I urged you when I was on my way to Macedonia, stay on where you are at Ephesus in order that you may warn and admonish and charge certain individuals not to teach any different doctrine.

1 Timothy 1:5 AMP:

Whereas the object and purpose of our instruction and charge is love, which springs from a pure heart and a good (clear) conscience and sincere (unfeigned) faith.

The “charge,” “command” or “instruction” Paul is speaking of here is given to protect the people in the church; hence, the use of the military language. Paul is telling Timothy that his tasks as pastor will include many things: building up the people, teaching them accurate doctrine, strengthening the faith of his congregation, and fighting a spiritual battle. Timothy has been known by his timidity, which is referred to elsewhere, so Paul seems to be using language in a way to change Timothy’s image of himself as “timid” to that of being a warrior, a commander in the spiritual battle so that he can “fight the good fight” or “wage a good warfare.”

Paul wants Timothy to protect the people from the lies that are promoted by false teachers, and he puts his delegation of authority to Timothy in writing in case anyone questions Timothy’s authority. Paul even points to the disciplinary action he had to take when he expelled two men from the church during his stay at Ephesus. Paul gives Timothy authority to make such decisions in his absence.

Paul then mentions in verse 18 the “**prophecies**” made about Timothy. The meaning here of prophecy is “*the function or vocation of a prophet specif : the inspired declaration of divine will and purpose.*”³

This verse expresses a deeply personal message to Timothy from Paul regarding prophecies apparently made about Timothy when he was chosen to be pastor. We are not told here exactly what is being referred to, but then Paul moves right on to encourage Timothy to rely on those prophecies as he engages in the good warfare, or fights the good fight.

“Fight the good fight” in verse 18 is obviously a reference to spiritual warfare. True believers in Christ are constantly engaged in spiritual warfare. Yet, our weapons are not “conventional,” but they are spiritual. Paul wrote in Ephesians 6 that “*We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers in high places.*” Such is the nature of spiritual warfare. You feel the struggle but the real enemy often remains unseen.

³ Merriam-Webster, Inc: *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. Eleventh ed.* Springfield, Mass. : Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003.

Warren Wiersbe comments regarding this section in 1 Timothy:

“If Jesus Christ had advertised for workers, the announcement might have read something like this:

‘Men and women wanted for difficult task of helping to build My church. You will often be misunderstood, even by those working with you. You will face constant attack from an invisible enemy. You may not see the results of your labor, and your full reward will not come till after all your work is completed. It may cost you your home, your ambitions, even your life.’”⁴

If we are seeking to live a godly life, or if we are trying to serve God, then we will find that we are constantly engaged in spiritual warfare. We are under “constant attack from an invisible enemy.”⁵

So you may be asking, what is “*spiritual warfare*”? Spiritual warfare is the attack of the enemy in his attempt to stop the ministry of Christ. Satan wants to make Christians stumble and fall away; he wants them to be weak and ineffective. Satan tries to make God’s people be hypocrites and even when they are not, the world accuses them of being hypocrites. Satan will do whatever he can to interfere with Christian ministry, ranging from causing electronic equipment to break down to throwing up roadblocks of various sorts in order to keep the ministry from happening or from having an effect. There are battles going on constantly around us in the spiritual realm, battles that we cannot see because they are between demons and God’s angels. These battles would try to hinder our prayers by striving to keep them from being answered or by delaying the answers. (For more on this interesting aspect read Daniel, chapters 9 and 10.) Another manifestation of spiritual warfare is that it seeks to rob us of our peace and it tries to defeat our testimony (1 Peter 5:8).

But God does not leave us defenseless. First of all, He battles for us. He sends His holy angels to fight on our behalf in many situations; but He also expects us to be good soldiers in His army. You may be asking, what weapons do we have for engaging in spiritual warfare? If we look at Ephesians 6:10 and following, 2 Corinthians 10:4, and various places in the Old Testament,⁶ we find that God fights for His children and His weapons are not “conventional.” “*For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds*” (2 Corinthians 10:4).

Therefore, we can expect to find that God’s battle plans are often very different from ours

⁴ Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Faithful*. Wheaton IL: Victor Books, ©1981. Page 13. Underline added.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See, for instance, Psalm 20:7; 2 Kings 6:15-17; Exodus 17:10-14

(Isaiah 55:8-9). He may call us to “*stand still and see the salvation of the Lord*” (Exodus 14:13) or to march in silence with trumpets blaring (Joshua 6:6-21).

Spiritual warfare demands our entire consecration and dedication—we must be single-minded about it (2 Timothy 2:4). Although God gives us a complete set of armor to wear in these battles, only one item is actually a weapon. If you read Ephesians 6 carefully you find that our main offensive weapon is the “*sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.*” So we must know and study the Bible; we must memorize Scripture; we must use God’s Word to guide us in our every move and let it frame our thoughts and value system. This requires more than learning from the Bible in church on Sunday mornings. It requires reading, studying, and applying Scripture to our lives every day. It also involves systematic memorizing of Bible verses. When was the last time you committed a portion of Scripture to memory? Certain educators these days see no need for memory work and do not teach children in schools the importance of memorizing. Unfortunately too many of our Sunday Schools have followed suit and do not stress Bible memory work. Yet if we do not know the Bible, how can we use it in our spiritual battles?

Knowing the Bible and living it is the way we can have the clear conscience spoken of in verse 19.

Because of the support and knowledge that has been given to him by his brothers in Christ, and the power made available to him by the Holy Spirit, Timothy is prepared to “*fight the good fight* (18).” And he is to fight the good fight by using the prophecies (awareness of the things God has revealed to certain people about the future) and knowledge he has been given. Why would such things be so effective? Well, how many people can predict what is going to happen hundreds or even thousands of years in the future. No one! But that is what Paul and Timothy were equipped to tell people. They had all the predictions from the Old Testament about the first coming of Jesus that had come true. Combining that with the marvelous teachings of Jesus as well as His predictions for the future and the remaining Old Testament predictions (prophecies) for things that would happen even after the first coming of Jesus, they were equipped with knowledge that would be very convincing to a great many people.

Why does Paul refer to a “*fight*” in verse 18? Because that is what it is. Timothy must know that he is in a spiritual battle and that he must use his spiritual gift, the knowledge provided him by the apostles, the armor of God, and the power of God as his weapons and defenses against the vicious, continuous attacks of Satan and his army. We think J. Vernon McGee’s comments on this subject are well worth repeating here.

“Living the Christian life is not as simple as some would like us to believe. It is more complex than walking when the light is green and not walking when the light turns red. We have intricate personalities, and Paul is saying there is real danger for us in our

human inconsistencies and failures. I assume you are not living in some ivory tower somewhere. Some Christians feel they are, that they are above the landscape and the smog and are way up yonder. But for those of us today who are walking on the sidewalks of our cities and rubbing shoulders with rough humanity and the problems of the world, we find that there are inconsistencies and failures. The danger we face is that of accomodating our faith to our failure.

“A man I knew came home from the mission field and got a job doing something rather ordinary. He said, ‘The Lord led me to do this.’ He had trained about nine years to be a missionary, and now he said the Lord had led him back home to take a job that just wasn't very important. I asked him if he really felt that that was the way the Lord leads, and he insisted it was. He repeats this so frequently that I am afraid what actually happened was that he accommodated his faith to his human failure on the mission field. That is a grave danger for all of us. My friend, when you and I fail -- when there is inconsistency in our lives -- we ought to go to Him and tell Him that we have fallen short, that we haven't measured up. As we will read shortly in 1 Timothy, the Lord Jesus is a wonderful mediator between God and man. **We need not be afraid to go to Him.**”⁷

Paul goes on to tell Timothy that there are times when these false teachers go way too far and need to be disciplined. *“Whom I have handed over to Satan (20).”* We do not know much about Hymaneus and Alexander, not even what position they held. At the very least these two men were vocal members who had not stayed with the teachings of the apostles but had come to other conclusions and were very vocal about them. These characters were apostates, and Paul did what was necessary when one who has been saved continues to speak out against the truth which had been taught by Jesus. **He gave them to Satan.** Because of Paul’s direct commissioning by Jesus to apostleship, he most likely had the authority to do this on his own. It would very likely then follow that the other apostles had that kind of authority as well. Now this is not an easy call to make and such action must be considered carefully by the church. Here in the case of Timothy it could be that Paul had given Timothy the full authority of an apostle but I think a very convincing argument could be made of his not being given such authority. So let us move on without resolving that question and see if it is relevant to the instruction Paul is giving Timothy.

Paul gets into this again in 1 Corinthians 5:3-5 NAS:

³ For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.

⁷ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 1."

⁴ In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus,

⁵ I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Evidently, some Corinthian believers hesitated to discipline one of their own in Paul's absence. Paul wrote them that he was present with them in spirit. He had already formulated his own opinion of the situation based on the evidence available. If the evidence was determined to be factual, he would agree that the man should be removed from Christian fellowship. Churches today also struggle over church discipline. In fact, the concept has become so inconsistent with our culture that you do not find many, if any at all, churches using discipline today. Yet it is a very scriptural procedure and the steps are spelled out for us. Listen to what Jesus had to say to this subject.

Matthew 18:15-17 (NASB):

¹⁵ "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.

¹⁶ "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed .

¹⁷ "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

In circumstances where discipline is determined to be the last opportunity to save the brother/sister who refuses to repent of his/her sin, the church must temporarily give the offender **over to Satan**. To do this is to exclude the brother/sister from the Christian community and to treat him/her as "a pagan or a tax collector." Sounds like they did not think very highly of their internal revenue service either, does it not? The purpose of disciplining a brother or sister in the church is not to punish them harshly, it is to deliver him/her into Satan's sphere of influence **in order to make them conscious of their sin and the need to repent**. The Bible tells us that Satan occasionally receives permission from God to test believers by weakening their physical conditions (Job 2:4-6; 2 Corinthians 12:7), so it is possible that Paul was referring to that type of punishment here.

If Village Church finds someone who is flagrantly and intentionally committing a sin without remorse or a feeling of the need to repent, we will prayerfully initiate such a discipline.

Paul used an Old Testament term in 1 Corinthians 5:5 to describe the day on which God will destroy all of his enemies and bless His people. The New Testament often uses this term for the second coming of Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10).

Although God might find it necessary to discipline a true believer when they stray off His

path, the goal of that discipline is always repentance and restoration to the fellowship that will lead to salvation on **the day of final judgment**. The intended result of such discipline should ultimately be redemptive, to free one from the consequences of sin.

How marvelous, how overwhelmingly loving is **God's grace**.

Looking again at verse 19, 1 Timothy 1:19 (NASB), Paul continues his instructions to Timothy: **1 Timothy 1:19 (NLT)**: *“Cling to your faith in Christ, and keep your conscience clear. For some people have deliberately violated their consciences; as a result, their faith has been shipwrecked.”*

Faith refers here to living according to the Gospel, God's word. We just learned back in verses 6 and 7 what could happen to those who did not cling obediently to God's Word. Those who wanted the status of being teachers of the Law but turned away from God's Word and began accepting all kinds of strange doctrine, getting involved in meaningless discussions with not a clue of what they were talking about.

Now, if you are sitting there in the pew thinking, *“This is just for the church leaders, not for me,”* think again. These words, these instructions, and these procedures apply to all Christians. They apply more so to pastors and teachers, but lay people are not off the hook. If you tell anyone else that you are a Christian and if you ever encourage someone else to come to church or to believe in Christ, then you are also being told in these verses to fight the good fight with pure doctrine and a clear conscience.

1 Timothy 1:6-7 (NLT):

⁶ *But some people have missed this whole point. They have turned away from these things and spend their time in meaningless discussions.*

⁷ *They want to be known as teachers of the law of Moses, but they don't know what they are talking about, even though they speak so confidently.*

1 Timothy 6:3-10 (NLT):

³ *Some people may contradict our teaching, but these are the wholesome teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. These teachings promote a godly life.*

⁴ *Anyone who teaches something different is arrogant and lacks understanding. Such a person has an unhealthy desire to quibble over the meaning of words. This stirs up arguments ending in jealousy, division, slander, and evil suspicions.*

⁵ *These people always cause trouble. Their minds are corrupt, and they have turned their backs on the truth. To them, a show of godliness is just a way to become wealthy.*

⁶ *Yet true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth.*

⁷ *After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it.*

⁸ *So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content.*

⁹ *But people who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction.*

¹⁰ *For the **love of money** is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows.*

1 Timothy 6:20-21 (NLT):

²⁰ *Timothy, guard what God has entrusted to you. Avoid godless, foolish discussions with those who oppose you with their so-called knowledge.*

²¹ *Some people have wandered from the faith by following such foolishness. May God's grace be with you all.*

If you will indulge me for a moment I have just received an irresistible urge to paraphrase these verses. This is how I would understand this verse:

“Timothy, the gift you have been given by the almighty God is the greatest possible honor and responsibility that anyone could ever receive. It is not only an honor to be entrusted with the Word of God, but think of the added honor God has given you by trusting you to keep the Word in its purest form, unchanged in any way, for the people who want to hear it. Therefore do not waste your time arguing with fools who make any claims that do not agree with what God has told you. Such people will not change their minds if those minds are not at least open to God's truth, and that will become evident to you very soon after you begin telling them about Christ. If you can see that they have made up their minds to resist Jesus, move on to others who show a willingness to listen and not argue. By teaching such lies both they and those that listen to them may well come to believe such false teaching and consequently be led from the truth to a belief that will lead them straight to Hell.”

But this, unfortunately, is what many people have a tendency to listen to and accept. They want to believe in a “*higher power*” that will accept them for who they are and allow them to believe that everyone goes to Heaven except the very worst of criminals, which certainly would not include basically good people like them. But those who allow themselves to stray from the true Word of God to teach a false religion that leads such people astray will one day suffer a more severe judgment than those who just reject the truth.

James 3:1 (NASB):

¹ *Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such*

we will incur a stricter judgment.

Timothy, however, would remain completely loyal to the Word of God. No matter what circumstances he found himself in, he would always stand fast on the Word of God. I hope all of us will do the same.