

The Pillar: Chapter 6 (Part 3 of 5)

Fight the Good Fight

1 Timothy 6:11-16

Mark Vroegop

11 But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13 I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, 14 to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16 who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

The sign is a simple wooden sign painted gold with blue letters, and it is mounted on a brick wall at the end of a stairwell. It reads “Play Like a Champion Today.” Do you know where it is located? It is the famous sign just outside of Notre Dame’s locker room.

Do you know the history of the sign? It was Lou Holtz, the coach of the Fighting Irish from 1986-1996, who discovered the slogan as he was doing research on the football program. He then had a sign made and mounted it just below a listing of the national championship teams.

After the sign was posted, a tradition developed. As the team made its way on to the field in South Bend, Indiana, each of the players would slap the sign, a final and definitive affirmation that he was ready to “play like a champion today.” The sign-slapping ritual had such significance and meaning that Holz made a traveling version of the sign for away games.

The sign, the final charge before the game, was powerful. Holz put it this way:

“Regardless of win-loss record, regardless of the problems you have when you walk out on that field, you have an obligation to your teammates and the fans to play to best of your ability – to play like a champion.”¹

If you’ve ever played on an athletic team, you know the power of those final words before you take the field or hit the court. The unifying and motivating power of the “huddle-up chant” is hard to capture.

¹ <http://www.und.com/sports/m-footbl/spec-rel/111204aac.html>

Fight the Good Fight!

If there was figurative sign in Timothy's life, written by Paul, it would be the seven words in verse 12. Paul wants Timothy to be different than the false teachers that he has said so much about. He has warned Timothy about their pride, greed, and specifically, about their love of money. Timothy needs to refute the error of these false teachers by being different and by preserving!

Today is the 22nd message in our study of this glorious book. We will wrap up this study by the end of May and then start a summer series on the Psalms like we did last year, but this time we are going to look at some really hard questions that the Psalmist asks. Questions like, "Why do you hide yourself?" or "Why have you forsaken me?" I want to help you know how to think when hardship comes, because it will come. You will suffer; it is only a matter of time. In August we'll be doing LIVE|12 again and addressing the subject of battling temptation. This fall we will jump into a major new series on the book of Exodus that will take us well into 2013.

Our text today is an intense passage. Think of it as if you can see the runway, with landing gear down, and it is time to land this thing. Or, back to the Notre Dame sign, think of it as you are approaching the sign, and it is "game time."

This final charge from Paul has three aspects to it that serve to impress upon Timothy the urgency of his task. Paul reminds him 1) who he is, 2) what he is to do, and 3) who he is to live for. While this text is primarily addressed to Timothy and to pastors in general, there are some things for all of us to learn and consider.

Who he is: A man of God

Paul wanted Timothy to understand who he is and the contrast between himself and the false teachers. That is one reason why Paul says, "But as for you . . ." There needs to be a sharp and clear distinction here. In other words, Timothy was to be different.

This phrase "but as for you . . ." is familiar marker in the Pastoral Epistles for a call to be different. Notice two of them:

13 while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed (2 Tim. 3:13-14).

³For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Tim. 4:3-5).

This is important for us to hear, especially in an age of tolerance, where unity in everything seems to be prized over everything, especially when it comes to religion and religious discussions. A Christian leader must be known for what he is for, but there also must be some level of contrast in

his life and in his teaching. There needs to be contrast, especially in regards to the conduct of one's life.

This contrast reaches its crescendo with an "old-school" term: man of God. This title is not extremely common in the New Testament, although it does surface in 2 Timothy 3:17 regarding the value of Scripture – "... that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." It is a title identifying the sacred and spiritual role to which Timothy has been called.

The concept has its roots in the Old Testament. There were certain men who were marked as God's servants or agents.² Moses and David are identified with this title (Deut. 33:1, Neh. 12:24), and this was also another name for the prophets. Samuel, for instance, was called the man of God (1 Sam. 9:6), as was Elijah (1 Kings 17:18) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:7). These were men upon whom God had placed the mantle of representing him, speaking his words, and pointing the people to truth. There is a rich Old Testament and historical tradition here.

A man of God is a representative of God and a proclaimer of his word. God speaks through his word, and he uses people to explain God's word to enact spiritual transformation. I hope you know what I mean by this. It is that supernatural moment when the truth of God's word, spoken through another, pierces your heart; it is the moment when you know that while there is a human voice you are hearing, it is the God who is speaking to you. It is what Paul talked about in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 – "*And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.*" It is what a moment that Dr. Martin Llyod-Jones, the pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, called "unction."

There are times when, entirely outside his own control, he is given a special authority, special power, an unction which is unusual . . . This, then, is the dual action of the Spirit. He takes the preacher, the speaker, whether in a pulpit or in private, and gives this enabling. Then the Holy Spirit acts upon the ones who are listening and deals with their minds and hearts and wills. Both things happen at the same time.³

There is nothing greater for the communicator or the listener, whether it is in a large setting, in a one-on-one conversation, or in counseling than to know that "God is here" as we interact with the Scriptures. Even those who are not full-time pastors can experience and see this happen. Two weeks ago I met a man who was converted on a business trip by one of our church members. In God's providence, he roomed with one of our College Parkers, even though he had told his wife that he was hoping that wouldn't happen. Apparently our brother's reputation for righteousness was well-known! As I heard the brief story of how he came to put his faith in Jesus, there was joy on his face and also on the face of the brother who roomed with him. Why is there double joy? Because both are able to witness the power of the Word of God.

² Gordon Fee, *The New International Biblical Commentary – 1-2 Timothy, Titus*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 149.

³ <http://adrianwarnock.com/2008/03/ask-doctor-what-do-you-mean-by-unction/>

The other aspect of this title is the sense of calling upon Timothy's life. He needs to be reminded about who he really is, because it will greatly help his perseverance. All of us are called in one sense to be godly men and women, but there is a special calling for those who give their lives. And those who embrace this calling need the supernatural call of God upon their lives because it is one of the ways that a person stays in the fight. The call of God, the internal and supernatural understanding that God put this in your soul, is what keeps you going when things are difficult, hard, and personal.

Timothy, for the sake of fighting for truth and his own perseverance, needed to be reminded who he is.

What he is to do: Five Commands

The next thing Paul does here is give Timothy a series of commands as to what he is to do. This is classic Paul in that he gives a string of five imperatives which represent the contrast between his life and ministry and that of the false teachers. He must not only realize who he is, but there is something for him to do.

1. Flee the wrong things

The first command relates to what Timothy is to aggressively avoid. The word "flee" means to move quickly and decisively to avoid danger or difficulty. The Greek word is *pheugo*, from which we get our English word fugitive. It is used in Matthew 24:16 and 20 to describe the flight of those who are fearful of the coming judgment of God. That is why I put the words "aggressively" and "avoid" together. There is no casualness here.

What is Timothy to flee from? The text simply says "these things." The NIV renders this section as "flee from all this." Just think of what we have learned about the false teachers. In chapter six alone we learned about their bad doctrine, their sinful fruit, their conceited pride, and their greed for more, especially money. After all that Paul has said about the dangers of the false teachers, Timothy should be soberly scared of what could happen to him. If he understands the dangers, then he will intentionally avoid the things that could become problematic.

Timothy needs to have a healthy sense of fear. He needs to see what the false teachers did and what happened as a result, and then use their examples as a warning that results in a conscious decision to run away from the wrong things. The present tense of the verb means that he must be on constant guard and always ready to flee.

Do you know that one of the important strategies in dealing with sin, according to the Bible, is not putting yourself in a situation where you will be tempted or not arguing with a temptation? A few examples:

²² So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. ²³ Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels (2 Tim. 2:22). ¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body (1 Cor.

6:18). ¹⁴ Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14). ²⁵ Let not your heart turn aside to her ways; do not stray into her paths (Prov. 7:25)

There is great wisdom here. You don't beat some sins with an argument; you beat them with speed.

2. Pursue the right things

It is not enough for Timothy to avoid the wrong things; he must reorient his heart toward the right things. Once again we find the "put off/put on" principle that is recorded in other parts of the Bible (see Col. 3:5-17). The idea is that a person has not really turned from his sin unless the sin has been replaced. In my premarital counseling I learned it like this from Ephesians 4:28 – "When does a liar stop being a liar? When he stops telling lies? No. When he starts telling the truth."

Therefore, Timothy's life is to be filled with the kind of attitudes and actions that fit with the fruit of the gospel. And notice that he is to be equally aggressive here. It is not as if he flees the bad things only to hope that the good things happen. The word "pursue" means to do something with intense effort or with a definite goal or purpose in mind. Only God can produce the things that Paul lists, but Timothy (and you!) will have to decide if he is going to place himself in a position to receive what God, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, wants to produce in him.

This is why the Bible often uses farming as a metaphor for spiritual growth. Take, for instance, Galatians 6:8 – *"⁸ For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life."* It is not complicated! If you don't plant grass seed, don't expand your lawn to grow grass. In the same way, if you don't make regular spiritual deposits into your soul, growth will never take place. You reap what you sow – positively and negatively.

So what is Timothy to pursue?

- **Righteousness** – In this context, this is not the righteousness that comes by faith at conversion (called justification). Rather, it means a life marked by obedience to God's commands.⁴
- **Godliness** – This relates to inward attitudes and motivations. It means to be God-like in who we really are. John Owen, the 15th Century Puritan who authored a fabulous book called *The Mortification of Sin*, said "A minister may fill his pews, his communion roll, the mouths of the public, but what that minister is on his knees in secret before God Almighty, that he is and no more."⁵ He must pursue personal godliness.
- **Faith** – The confidence to trust in God, not only for salvation, but for every aspect of one's life. He puts his hope in the promises of God and in his word.
- **Love** – This is closely connected with faith (1 Tim. 1:5, 2:15, 4:11), and it means a chosen and intentional love – the kind of love with which God has loved us.
- **Steadfastness** – There is an important Greek word here: *hupomone*. It means to bear up or to remain under. It identifies an indomitable spirit of joyful hope in the midst of difficult

⁴ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Commentary – 1 Timothy*, (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 1995), 262.

⁵ MacArthur quoting I.D.E. Thomas, *A Puritan Golden Treasury*, (Banner of Truth, 1977)

circumstances. It is the kind of spirit expressed in 2 Corinthians 4:1 - ¹⁶*So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.* ¹⁷*For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,* ¹⁸*as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.*

- **Gentleness** – This is patience with difficult people. After all, Timothy is dealing with people and their problems; that is what pastoral ministry is. Therefore, he needs a controlled spirit.

So these are the things Timothy is to pursue with intentionality and passion.

3. Fight for perseverance

Clearly Timothy is in a struggle, and Paul calls on him to embrace the hardship and difficulty that will come with his charge. The phrase “fight the good fight of faith” sounds like Timothy is in a battle. While that is true – there certainly is a spiritual battle raging – the meaning here is more related to the struggle an athlete has when competing. The word for “fight” is *agonizomai*. You can hear the word “agony,” can’t you? In other contexts Paul uses the metaphor of running (2 Tim. 4:7) or boxing (1 Cor. 9:25-27).

Those of you who have competed athletically know what he is talking about. There comes a point in the competition when your body is telling you to stop or when the competition is getting difficult. At that point the momentum can shift, depending on what level of perseverance the team or the players have. A coach might even say, “Fight through it!” or “We’ve got bring the fight to them.” The idea is that the competition requires perseverance. It demands rugged commitment to not quit.

Timothy is to fight this way for the gospel. He is to believe what God’s word says and be faithful in season and out of season (2 Tim. 4:2). The enemy loves to use discouragement to defeat his servants. But he is to fight for joy! He is to live in and through the power of the gospel. He must agonize in the pursuit of perseverance.

4. Live for eternity

Paul’s next charge is beautiful: *“Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”* This is the prize. This is what Timothy is striving towards. He is to continue running and agonizing and striving until he reaches the very end. But this is not just a future event.

Timothy is to take hold of eternal life now! The present tense implies that this is something that Timothy should embrace continually, not just in the future. Here is another example of the “already”/“not yet” paradigm of so much of Scripture. To lay hold of eternal life means that the orientation of his life is beyond this present one. It means that he is “seeking those things which are above, where Christ is” (Col. 3:1). He strives to live his life in an eternal value-set.

To add even greater weight to this, Paul reminds him that living this way is 1) a calling from God and 2) something he personally testified to in the presence of many witnesses. His life was marked by the calling of eternal work. Therefore, he should live this way.

5. Serve faithfully

Paul concludes this string of commands with a solemn charge. Notice the depth and formality of what is cited here and how it is connected to Jesus: *"13 I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession . . ."* Notice that 1) this is in front of God, 2) he has life-giving power, and 3) Jesus endured and made a good confession too. The appeal here is to some significant spiritual realities.

In light of these things, Timothy is to *"14 to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ."* What commandment? It seems that this is another way for Paul to refer to Timothy's faith and ministry. He is to watch himself and his teaching closely (1 Tim. 4:16) and to remember that *"the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith"* (1 Tim. 1:5). He is to serve faithfully over the long haul.

Most of this letter has been about the near-term challenges with dealing with false teaching. But notice here how the tone has shifted. Timothy, and any who name the name of Christ, must take a longer term view of what God is doing and what they are called to do. These five commands, while given to Timothy, apply to all of us. We can flee from the wrong things, pursue the right things, fight hard, live for eternity, and make it our aim to finish well. This text is a great reminder that part of doing things well spiritually is doing them well continually.

In the midst of a culture that looks for answers in nano-seconds and lightning-fast fixes, the Bible calls us to a lifetime of faithfulness. So be encouraged, be decisive, be intentional, be eternally-minded, but be patient.

What he should live for: The glory of God

Finally, this text ends with one of the best rhetorical flourishes in all the Bible. Here is a doxology that is filled with a powerful reminder as to who Timothy (and all of us) should be living for. Paul gives Timothy a lofty view of the glory of God.

Remember that the last command was to be faithful *"until the appearing of Jesus Christ which he will display at the proper time."* Believers are called to persevere, with the hope that one day Jesus is going to return and make everything right. We live under the hope-filled expectation that our King is going to return and that God will dwell with his people again. That is a fact and it helps. However, what follows helps put some theological color on it, and the effect is that it hits the heart. In other words, this is a rallying cry. It is not just the reality of the end that motivates us; it is the majesty of who God is that affects us emotionally.

Just listen to the crescendo and how it makes your heart beat for God:

he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16 who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

There is so much here. You live by considering the glory and majesty of God. This glory is affirmed, by four ways, that God is transcendent – far above human control or influence. God is:

- **Invincible** (“the blessed and only Sovereign, King of Kings and Lord of Lords”) – God is beyond all interference by earthly powers, and no human ruler can challenge his authority.⁶ He cannot be defeated. God is unstoppable.
- **Immortal** (“who alone has immortality”) – God is not subject to the limitations or the foes of death, space or time. God never had a beginning, and there is no source for God. He is!
- **Inaccessible** (“who dwells in unapproachable light”) – He is beyond the reaches of sinful people. Evil cannot enter his presence. He is holy!
- **Invisible** (“who no one has ever seen or can see”) – He is beyond human sight and even human comprehension. God is completely other-worldly. The closest we’ve ever come is Jesus. He is invisible. He is not like me.

He is invincible, immortal, inaccessible, and invisible! And when you consider this, you can’t help but break out in praise: “to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.” You see, this is not only the greatest thing in the universe, this is the greatest thing to live for. This is what it means to be a Christian! To know who you are, what you are commanded to do, and what you live for.

Nothing helps you with a sense of mission and purpose like knowing that you are child of God, that obedience is your delight, and that the glory of God is your passion. This will propel you into hard ministries dealing with hard people. Nothing helps our endurance like knowing that you are a forgiven son or daughter of God, that God wants to work through you, and that it is the beauty of God’s glory that eclipses the pain and difficulties that you face.

You fight the fight of faith with a greater vision of who you are, of what is really important, and of what is ultimately beautiful. This is the motivation for ministry and for living as a Christian in the world. It is simply fighting by agreeing with the Psalmist:

*⁴ One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple (Psalm 27:4)*

You fight by living for one thing: the glory of God.

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Scriptural Citations: Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version.

⁶ John R. W. Stott, The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1996), 159.