

Wage the Good Warfare: 1 Timothy 1:18-20
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In our passage for this morning we find an exhortation to wage the good warfare—to fight the good fight—and we also see the tragic and severe repercussions for those who do not wage this good warfare. These are the two elements of this text, and I want to look at each of them in turn. First, we'll look at the exhortation to wage the good warfare, and then we'll look at the sad reality that some make shipwreck of their faith, which should serve as a warning to all of us.

Waging the Good Warfare (18 – 19a)

“This charge” that Paul speaks of in verse 18 is referring all the way back to the charge he mentioned in verses 3 and 5. Remember, this whole chapter, beginning in verse 3, is dealing with false teachers. And the instruction back in verse 3 was for Timothy to “charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine.” Then in verse 5 he stated very clearly that “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” Paul then went on in verses 8-11 to talk about the law and its proper use, as opposed to the way the false teachers were using it. And then in verses 12-17 Paul offers himself as a prime example of how the true Gospel brings about radical change in a person’s life, which can be contrasted with the bad fruit that is produced by false teaching. Now, at the end of chapter 1, Paul returns to this charge which he is entrusting to Timothy. He is charging Timothy to be a leader in the Ephesian church and an advocate for the truth. He is charging Timothy to hold fast to the faith and to rebuke those who deviate from it. This is a weighty charge.

Paul wants to encourage Timothy in this, so he reminds him of “the prophecies previously made” about him. This refers to Timothy’s calling into ministry. We find an example of this kind of calling into ministry in Acts 13, where it says, “Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13:1-3). A similar kind of thing happened also for Timothy, which Paul refers to here in 1 Timothy 1 (and also in chapter 4:14). There was a clear indication from God that Timothy was to be set apart in a special way for Gospel ministry, and

individuals recognized this calling upon his life, and laid hands on him and commissioned him to this work.

Paul is seeking to encourage Timothy with this reminder. Timothy, when the battle is hard, when you're down, discouraged, distraught, remember that God has called you to this task. And just as His supernatural power was evident in your calling, it will also be evident in your continued ministry. This reminder is to be a help to Timothy as he wages the good warfare. Notice the wording of verse 18. At the end of the verse Paul writes, "that by them you may wage the good warfare," meaning the prophecies previously made about you. He's telling Timothy to continually remember his God-given calling, and to use that as an encouragement to press on in the fight of faith.

In a similar way, all believers can look back to ways in which God has been gracious to us and His calling on our lives has been clear. And we should be greatly encouraged by that. Maybe you're discouraged or depressed, maybe you're struggling with a particular sin and you just feel like throwing in the towel. Remember that God has called you to be one of His own, and that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). That is an awesome promise, and something we should bring to mind often. We should look to the past and call to mind the many, many ways that God has poured out His mercy on us—how He saved us through the blood of Christ, how He has sanctified us, conforming us to the image of Christ, how He has provided for us and instructed us and drawn us closer to Himself. And then we can look to the future with the confidence that He will continue to do all of these things. Let's not be like the Israelites who watched the Lord separate the Red Sea and then just three days later they're grumbling in the wilderness because they're not trusting God to give them water (Exodus 15:22-25). Let's remember His grace in the past and trust in His grace for the future. Ultimately, let's remember the cross, and let's put our hope in all that the cross has accomplished for us. We look back to Christ's sacrificial death for us, and we look forward to an eternity with Him that is only possible because of that death.

What is Paul talking about when he says, "wage the good warfare," or in other translations, "fight the good fight"? Well, at the end of this letter, in 6:12, Paul says a similar thing. He says, "Fight the good fight of faith." Paul is not talking about a physical battle. He's talking about a spiritual battle. He's talking about a fight that takes place, and must take place, in the heart of every believer each and every day.

Paul's next phrase shows how one wages this good warfare. It's done by holding faith and a good conscience. Have you ever

thought about holding faith and a good conscience as warfare? Have you ever thought about the Christian life as a battle? Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, which we memorized last week as our fighter verse (by the way, they're not called *fighter* verses on accident), illustrate this battle in very vivid terms. He says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell" (Matthew 5:29-30). That's what the battle is about, brothers and sisters. This is what it looks like to wage the good warfare. And this is why the warfare analogy is so appropriate, because this is serious! Life and death are at stake. Heaven and hell are at stake. And, of course, Jesus is not talking about literally tearing out an eye or cutting off a hand, just like Paul is not writing about physical warfare. Because the problem isn't with the eye or the hand. The problem is in the heart. The problem is our sinful desires.

Therefore we need to be constantly on guard to resist those sinful desires and fight against them by trusting in God's promises. This is how we hold on to the faith. This is how we fight the fight of faith. We must cling to the promises of God in His Word (Tom Dyba talked about the importance of this last week), and we have to use those promises to wage war against the lies of sin which our sinful hearts are so prone to believe. Do you see the battle? Can you see the battle lines a little more clearly? On the one side, we have the promises of God that following Him and obeying Him will bring us deep peace and contentment and abiding joy, in this life and then much more so in heaven. On the other hand are the promises of sin, that disobeying God will bring us more pleasure than obeying God. That's what sin says to us. That's how sin lies to us. And what we have to preach to ourselves on a continual basis is the fact that God's promises are true and sin's promises are lies. Sin may bring momentary pleasure, which is how it entices us, but it will kill us in the end.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6). Sin says, "Righteousness is boring, but material possessions and worldly pleasure will satisfy you." Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). Sin says, "It's more exciting to fill your mind with lustful thoughts." Jesus says, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Sin says, "It's more blessed to receive than to give." And we could go on and on. There are God's unfailing promises, and there are the lies of sin. And throughout every day we face the struggle between the two.

Are we going to cling to God's promises, or be deceived by the lies of sin? Our sinful hearts are so prone to wander, and we need to pray for God's grace to believe His promises, to hold onto faith, to wage the good warfare.

Holding faith is the first thing that is mentioned at the beginning of verse 19, but the second is also very important: a good conscience. A good conscience is a very precious thing, and we put ourselves in great danger when we violate our consciences. When we try to justify something we've done. When we reason to ourselves that it wasn't really that bad, and it will be OK to do it again, and we don't really need to confess it to anyone, that is an extremely dangerous place to be. John Stott writes, "if we disregard the voice of conscience, allowing sin to remain unconfessed and unforsaken, our faith will not long survive" (*Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*, 57).

Is there any sin that you're hiding? Anything that has pricked your conscience, but you are trying to ignore that uncomfortable feeling of having an unsettled conscience? The way to deal with that uncomfortable feeling is not to suppress it or ignore it, but to confess your sin to the Lord, and confess it to a brother or sister in Christ, and repent of that sin and seek the Lord's forgiveness. If you don't, then your conscience will grow less and less sensitive, and you will eventually find yourself doing things you never thought you would do. Indeed, you will find yourself on the road to destruction. Later in this letter Paul refers to those "whose consciences are seared" (1 Timothy 4:2). In other words, they have violated their consciences again and again so that there is no longer any sensitivity. Don't allow your conscience to become seared, insensitive, calloused. Be attentive to those moments when your conscience is pricked. Hold on to faith and a good conscience, and thus wage the good warfare, fight the good fight of faith.

Making Shipwreck of the Faith (19b – 20)

Secondly, let's talk about making shipwreck of the faith. Here we'll see what's at stake in waging the good warfare. As we fight the good fight we will finish well. But if we give up the battle, if we violate our consciences, we may find that we've made shipwreck of our faith. This is a frightening warning. In the middle of verse 19 Paul transitions from giving Timothy a word of exhortation to reminding Timothy of the grave consequences for those who do not heed this exhortation.

He says, "By rejecting this [referring to a good conscience], some have made shipwreck of their faith." By repeatedly suppressing their consciences some have abandoned the faith. This is a very sad reality. There are individuals who seem to make a

start in the faith. They seem to love the Lord. They seem to have a love for the Word. There seems to be fruit in their lives. And yet at some point along the way their hearts grow cold. It often happens very gradually, beginning with things that are not easily detected by others. Maybe it begins with prayerlessness, and less and less Bible reading, and then a gradual distancing of oneself from other believers—looking for excuses to miss church and to miss small group because you don't want to be convicted or confronted by the sin that you've convinced yourself is not so bad. Eventually this slide into spiritual apathy and a seared conscience will result in an outright denial of the Gospel. This denial of the Gospel may first become evident in embracing some heresy—a view of God or of Christ or of salvation that is fundamentally at odds with the teaching of the Bible. Or one's denial of the Gospel will first become evident in some blatant immorality in a person's life—sexual perversion, infidelity, leaving one's spouse, an unbridled pursuit of worldly comfort and pleasure, turning to a life of theft and deception. Making shipwreck of one's faith can take many forms, and this verse ought to cause each one of us to examine our hearts and to be on guard for any ways that we might be heading down that path.

You might say, Well what about once saved, always saved? You might be thinking to yourself right now, I know that I'm saved because I prayed the prayer and got baptized and I'm a member of the church, and therefore even if my life does slip some, even if I do fall into some kind of immorality, I know that I'll still go to heaven because of eternal security. Nobody loses their salvation. Let me respond to that, because this is a very important point for us to understand. It is true that everyone whom God saves, He also causes to persevere to the end in faith. He does not lose anyone. But it is also true that there are many individuals who claim to be Christians and attend church and even read their Bibles and do many other things that make them look like believers, and yet their hearts have never been changed. They are not regenerate. But this only becomes clear when they walk away from the faith. They make shipwreck of the faith and show that they were never truly saved. 1 John 2:19 illustrates this. It says, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us." Individuals have walked away from Christianity, they have left the faith, which demonstrates that they were not true believers.

So if you're sitting here this morning and you're justifying some sin in your life and you're taking comfort in the idea of once saved always saved, I want to warn you on the basis of God's Word that you are in a very dangerous position. Because if you

continue in your sinful ways and continue to rationalize your sin rather than confess it and repent of it, then you may very well end up demonstrating that your profession of faith is a *mere* profession with no real substance to it. Every one of us who professes Christ should be warned that if we fall into unrepentant, unconfessed sin, we will show that we are not, in fact, Christians, but unbelievers who are in danger of hell. Don't hold some mechanical view of eternal security. Read the text! If you reject a good conscience you will end up making shipwreck of your faith, which will show that the faith you professed was not a real faith.

Verse 20 makes this warning all the more vivid and personal, for Paul names two individuals who have made shipwreck of their faith, and he mentions the action that he has taken in response to them. Hymanaeus is mentioned again in 2 Timothy 2:16-18. "But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some." So in the case of Hymenaeus, his swerving from the faith was evident in his false teaching. He had an over-realized eschatology. He thought the resurrection had already happened, and by this false teaching, by this irreverent babble that was spreading like gangrene, he was upsetting the faith of some.

The other individual Paul names in 1 Timothy 1 is Alexander. This was a common name, so we're not sure if this is the same Alexander he refers to in 2 Timothy 4:14-15, where he says, "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message." This may or may not be the same Alexander. But the point is, both Hymanaeus and Alexander had made shipwreck of their faith. They were part of the church, but then somehow began to embrace things that were contrary to the Gospel and they were leading others astray with their false teaching.

So Paul handed them over to Satan. That sounds scary. What does it mean? What does it mean that Paul handed Hymanaeus and Alexander over to Satan? In 1 Corinthians 5 we find the same idea. In that situation the problem wasn't false teaching, but it was gross immorality. "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife [this man was sleeping with his stepmother]. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on

the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). The idea of delivering over to Satan is clarified in that passage for us, because it’s parallel to “Let him who has done this be removed from among you,” (v. 2). In other words, to be delivered to Satan is to be removed from the church. This is what we call church discipline. This man who was living in sexual immorality was to be removed from the church. But do you notice the purpose of this removal—the purpose of delivering this person to Satan? The purpose is so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord (v. 5). That’s the purpose of church discipline. It’s not because the church dislikes this person and therefore wants to exclude them. It’s just the opposite. Church discipline is exercised out of love for the person who is living in sin. It’s redemptive. It’s meant to bring a person to repentance. That’s what Paul says also in our passage in 1 Timothy 1. He says, “whom I handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” You see, his desire is that Hymanaeus and Alexander would repent of their false teaching and embrace the truth of the Gospel. Handing them over to Satan is meant to show them how serious their sin is and to serve as a wake up call that you can’t just go on like this and think there aren’t going to be any consequences. There are consequences, and they are very grave consequences indeed. Because when a person is put out of the church they are, as it says, handed over to Satan. There is a certain level of protection that we all experience because we are part of the church. By our commitment to a local body of believers we are protected from the evil one. But that protection is removed when a person is excluded from the fellowship because of unrepentant sin.

It’s necessary to clarify at this point that church discipline is not exercised for any and every sin. If that was the case, we would all be thrown out of the church. But Matthew 18 gives us the clear guidelines for how this ought to be done. Jesus says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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” (Matthew 18:15-17). The point is that a person must be removed from the church, not for just any sin—because we’re all sinners—but for unrepentant sin.

You might still be asking, Well why should we ever remove someone from the church? Wouldn’t it be more Christ-

like to be accepting and forgiving and to overlook the offense? I've already mentioned that the purpose of church discipline is redemptive. And therefore it's the most loving thing we can do for a person who is living in unrepentant sin. We're not doing anybody any favors by letting them remain on the membership role of the church and assume that they're saved, when in fact their life indicates that they are unregenerate and therefore facing the punishment of hell. The most loving thing we can do for a person in that situation is to confront their sin, and if need be, even remove them from membership, in order to impress upon them their need to repent.

Church discipline is also crucial to uphold the witness of the church and the purity of the church. We are not a club. We are a group of sinners who have been saved by God's grace. And it's God's design that His church be distinct from the world. And thus it honors God when we obey His Word by preserving a regenerate church membership. We want to be diligent to make sure that those who are members of this church are true believers. That's why we ask hard questions in membership interviews, like: What spiritual fruit do you see in your life? What evidence is there that God is at work in your life? What is the Gospel? We need to be careful on the front end to receive into membership only individuals who can give a credible profession of faith. And then we also need to have the courage to remove from membership those whose lives contradict their profession of faith because they are living in unrepentant sin.

In closing, I exhort all of us again to wage the good warfare. The seriousness of these verses should be a huge motivation for each of us to do this. There's the positive motivation of verse 18. We can look back at how God has been gracious to us in the past and let that encourage us to press on, holding faith and a good conscience. And then there's also the negative motivation of realizing the consequences for giving up the fight.