

The Fight of Faith: 1 Timothy 6:11-12
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The word “fight” and the word “faith” might not be two words that you would think go together. Or at least you might think that they shouldn’t be put together, lest we promote any kind of so-called “holy war.” But in the passage that we’re going to study together this morning, Paul says, “Fight the good fight of the faith.” And so we need to understand what this fight is all about. And as we’ll see, it’s not a fight that we wage against other people. It’s a battle that goes on in our own hearts, as we fight against our own sinful nature.

As we remember the context of this chapter, we can see how Paul is now sharply contrasting Timothy with the kinds of people he had in mind in the previous verses. Throughout the whole letter Paul has been concerned to confront the false teachers who teach things that are contrary to the Gospel, who live unholy lives, who are prideful and divisive and lovers of money. And he has written about such individuals and warned against such things in the verses leading up to this. And now he writes in verse 11, “But as for you, O man of God . . .” “Man of God” was a term used in the Old Testament to refer to men such as Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, Elisha and others. It’s used in the New Testament only here and in 2 Timothy 3:17 where we read that “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

To refer to Timothy, or to any believer, as a man of God or woman of God, is not to suggest that we are sinless. It is not to suggest that we are able to resist every temptation to be prideful or divisive or jealous or covetous or greedy. But the use of the term here is certainly meant to contrast Timothy with the false teachers and to encourage Timothy in the path that he is on. He is not a man of the world, as the false teachers were, even though they had the outward appearance of religion. He is a man of God. He belongs to God. His life is now oriented toward God. He lives to please God and submit to God and to be involved in God’s work. And these things are true of every believer. We have been purchased through Jesus’ sacrifice, and we now belong to God.

Paul’s use of this honorific title for Timothy was not meant to puff him up in any way. And it should not be a source of pride for any of us to think of ourselves as men and women of God. But it should be a reminder to us that we are different from the world. We are new creatures in Christ. We are no longer slaves to sin, but are now slaves of God. We have a new Master. Therefore to

recognize that we are men and women *of God* should be a great encouragement to us as we persevere in this fight of faith that Paul is about to discuss.

In verses 11-12 there are four imperatives, four commands. And I'll structure the rest of the sermon around these commands. In verse 11 there is the command to flee, and then the command to pursue. There are certain things we must run away from, and other things we are to run toward. Then in verse 12 there is the command to fight, and the command to take hold of. There is a fight that we are to be engaged in, and there is something that we are fighting for—there is a prize that we are fighting to obtain. All of these are such vivid commands, and they should impress upon us the intensity with which we must live the Christian life. It involves fleeing unrighteousness. It involves pursuing righteousness. It involves fighting the good fight of the faith. And it involves taking hold of eternal life. This is the Christian life. It is a fight. It is a grueling fight, and it is a fight that will continue throughout this life.

My hope for each of us this morning is that we will see the intensity of this fight and the necessity of this fight for all believers. This is not something that applies only to those who want to be pastors. These are not commands that are directed only toward those who want to be part of some elite class of Christians—the super-spiritual ones or the extra-holy ones. No, this is normal Christianity. This is the Christian life. And the clear implication is that if you are not engaged in this fight, you will not inherit eternal life. That's what is at stake here. So let's pay attention to this and consider what this must look like in our lives.

Flee (verse 11)

The first command is to flee. Paul commands Timothy to “flee these things.” And if we look back over the previous verses (verses 3-10), we see what he is referring to. It is a command to flee the very things that have entangled the false teachers: false doctrine, pride, division, envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and the love of money. Timothy, flee these things. Run away from them. Don't be enticed by seductive heresies. Don't fall into petty quarrels. Don't allow yourself to be lured by the comforts and pleasures that money can provide. Run in the opposite direction.

The word has the connotation of escaping from danger. In Matthew 2:13, for instance, an angel of the Lord told Joseph, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Or in Acts 7:29, in Stephen's speech, the same word is used to refer to Moses fleeing to Midian, because he feared for

his life in Egypt. And it's with that same kind of intensity and urgency that we must flee from sin. We must run for our lives. We must escape the dangers of becoming ensnared by sin. Because if we do not flee, we will surely die. If we do not wage war against the sin in our lives, but instead justify it and accommodate it and live in it, then we will demonstrate that we are not, in fact, new creatures in Christ. We may profess to know Christ, but do not truly know Him. We may attend church, but are not true believers. Those who are really born again will be engaged in this battle that involves fleeing from sin, and this command is intended to spur us on in the fight.

Paul uses this command elsewhere. In 1 Corinthians 6:18 he says, "Flee from sexual immorality." This reminds us of Joseph the son of Jacob, who was sold into slavery by his brothers and ended up serving in the house of Potiphar. And Genesis 39 records how Potiphar's wife was trying to seduce Joseph and get him to sleep with her, and do you remember what Joseph did? He fled! He consistently resisted her advances, and then when she found him in the house alone and caught him by his garment and said, "Lie with me," the text says that "he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house" (Genesis 39:12). That is a very practical illustration of how to flee from sexual immorality. Run away from it. And as we talk more about the fight of faith we'll see how we must flee from these things *in our hearts*. It's not just a matter of physically removing ourselves from certain situations, because wherever we run we take our sinful nature with us. So it's ultimately a matter of fleeing from sin in our hearts—fighting the good fight of the faith on the battleground of our own souls. Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 10:14, "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry."

And in 2 Timothy 2:22 he combines the same two exhortations that he does here. Flee and pursue. He writes, "So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart."

Pursue (verse 11)

Let's look, then, at this second command—to pursue. In our passage, in the second half of verse 11, he says, "Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness." The connection between these two commands is illuminating. It's not that we are simply running away from certain things. The Christian life is not simply a list of things to avoid. No, as we flee from sin we are at the same time pursuing something else. As we run along the narrow path we are at the same time fleeing sin and pursuing righteousness. So this is how we know if we're moving in the right direction in our Christian lives. Are we running away

from sin? And are we running toward righteousness and godliness and faith and love and steadfastness and gentleness?

Paul gives a similar list of virtues in Galatians 5:22-23 where he calls them the fruit of the Spirit. And truly, these are things that the Spirit produces in the lives of believers. We can't produce these things on our own, from our own willpower. But as new creatures in Christ, this is the fruit that is produced in our lives. And we must actively pursue these things and pray for God's grace to enable us to grow in these ways.

We must pursue righteousness and godliness. That is, we must seek to obey God's commands and conform our lives to His perfect standard. We will never fully attain to that standard in this life, because of our sin, but the Christian life is a life of striving to be more and more like Christ, who did live a perfect life. He is our example of righteousness and godliness.

We must also pursue faith, which Paul will elaborate on in the next verse. We must fight the good fight of faith. And we are also to pursue love. Love for God and love for neighbor. In contrast to the bickering and quarrels and conceit that was exemplified in the lives of the false teachers in Ephesus, Paul exhorts Timothy to pursue a life of love.

Finally, we are also to pursue steadfastness and gentleness. We must persevere. We cannot be the kind of people who are really excited about the Gospel for a season and then the passion fades away. We must be diligent and consistent in the fight of faith. It is an ongoing battle. And, along with the virtue of love, we are also to be gentle people. We should speak the truth in love, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:15. We can stand for the truth and also demonstrate the love of Christ and the gentleness of Christ even toward those who oppose the truth.

So there is a fleeing and a pursuing that is involved in the fight of faith. And it's the narrow path of the Christian life that guides us away from sin and toward righteousness.

Fight (verse 12)

Moving on to verse 12 now we find an even more vivid command. He tells Timothy, and us, to "fight the good fight of the faith." He made a very similar statement in 1:18 where he spoke of waging the good warfare. The imagery there is military warfare. Here in 6:12 he uses different words, and it's more of an athletic metaphor. With both of these analogies Paul wants to implant in our minds these vivid pictures of the intensity with which we must live out this Christian life. It's not a walk in the park. It's not a seat in the bleachers, sitting as a spectator. It's war. It's battle. It's intense competition, striving to win the prize. This is the fight of faith.

It is a very unique kind of battle or competition that we are engaged in. Notice that Paul calls it the *good* fight of the faith. And one of the very good things about this fight, and a way in which it is very different than military warfare or athletic competition, is that we do not fight this battle in our own strength. It is the good fight of *the faith*. It is a concept that is counter-intuitive to our human nature. We think of a battle or a competition, and we begin to think of things we can do to win. How can I exert my will and exert my energies and my capabilities and strength to win this fight. But this is not that kind of fight. It is not a fight to *do*, but a fight to *rest*. Doesn't that sound odd? We must engage in battle within our own hearts to rest in the arms of our Savior Jesus Christ. We must fight against the sinful nature that resides within us that makes us want to trust in ourselves rather than trusting in God. It is the good fight of the faith.

Pastor John Piper writes, "it is a good fight because it is not a struggle to carry a burden, but a struggle to let a burden be carried for us" (*When I Don't Desire God*, 38). So don't hear this verse as a burden—another thing you have to add to your "to do" list. It's not a fight to do, but to rest. To let the burden be carried for you.

I remember when I was a teenager being at different youth camps, either with a group from school or from church, and doing what was called the trust fall. It was a kind of teambuilding activity that the camp would organize. One person would stand on a platform of some kind and the others would line up behind them in two rows facing each other with their arms interlocked to catch the person as they fell backwards. It was a trust fall. You had to trust your friends to catch you and not to drop you on the ground. And I don't remember anyone being dropped on the ground. But I do remember individuals who were scared to fall. They could not bring themselves to let go of the security of standing on their own two feet. They were terrified to fall into the arms of their friends, even though they had watched the group catch everyone else without any problems. And that's the picture I have in my mind of the fight of faith. It's not a fight to accomplish something. It's not a fight to fill your quota of good works. It's not a fight to carry a heavy burden. It's a fight to let go. It's a fight to let your burden be lifted from you. It's a fight to fall into the arms of the One who is more than capable of catching us.

In one sense, this would seem to be the easiest thing imaginable. But in another sense, due to our sinful pride, it is extremely difficult. In fact, it's impossible apart from God's regenerating grace. We are so wrapped up in ourselves that we convince ourselves that we can make it on our own. We live under the delusion that we don't need God. And we live in bondage to

that sinful and foolish pride until God reaches into our hearts and changes us from the inside out and shows us how desperately we need Him. And then we gladly fall into His arms and wonder how we had been so blind. And that's just the beginning, because then every situation we face, every decision we face, every trial we face, is going to be a fight in our hearts to either fall into His arms and trust in His goodness and trust in the goodness of His commands or to take matters into our own hands and tell God that we don't need Him for the moment. The Christian life is a constant battle between these two things. Are we going to trust in ourselves or trust in God? It's a constant battle to cast all our cares on Him—to humble ourselves before Him and cry out to Him for help and for grace.

I had a friend years ago who shared with me that he had a very difficult time asking anyone for help of any kind. It was almost paralyzing. He simply could not bring himself to ask anyone for anything. And so often that's exactly how we relate to God. We don't want to bother God with our requests. Or we think He can't really do anything to help us. Or we just feel like we can accomplish everything on our own, in our own strength. What we need to do, what we need to fight in our hearts to do continually, is to fall into the arms of our Savior and acknowledge our desperate need for His help.

Let me ask you, do you see this fight going on within yourself? Many of you are very aware of this battle that wages within your soul. You feel tempted to worry about a particular situation in your life, and you know that you must fight against that temptation by reminding yourself of God's goodness and God's sovereignty over all things. Or you feel tempted to entertain a lustful thought and you know you must fight that by reminding yourself of God's good commands to us regarding purity. There is much greater joy to be found in pursuing God than in pursuing the pleasures of this world.

If this fight is familiar to you, then you should be encouraged. Even if you know that you lose many battles, be encouraged that by God's grace you also win some of them. Because apart from God's work in our lives, we would not even be engaged in this warfare at all. It wouldn't even be on the radar screen. Therefore if you're here this morning and you have no experience of what this verse is talking about, then you should seriously question whether you are a Christian. If you are under the assumption that your salvation is secure because of some past outward act that you did, I want to warn you not to put your hope in that. If you think that you're going to heaven because of a prayer you prayed, or because you're a member of a church, or because you have been baptized, and that's the ticket you need to

get into heaven, then you do not understand biblical Christianity. Many people assume that they're Christians because they made said a prayer to receive Christ at some point in their lives, and they think that they can coast through the rest of live, living like the rest of the world lives, and still go to heaven when they die. But that is not what the Bible teaches. The Christian life is a fight of faith. We cannot coast to heaven.

Listen to how Jesus speaks of this battle. He says, "if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire" (Matthew 18:8-9; see also Matthew 5:29-30). Jesus is using hyperbole in that statement. He does not intend for us to actually cut off a hand or foot or tear out an eye. But He does intend for us to take drastic measures in the fight of faith. We need to cut away those things that tempt us to trust in anything other than God. We need to fight to keep our focus on Christ.

And the reason this is so serious is because heaven and hell are at stake. It is better to make radical sacrifices and take drastic measures in the fight of faith than to coast through life holding onto your church membership card and then find that it means nothing on the day of judgment.

Take Hold

This leads us to the fourth and final command that Paul gives, which is in the second part of verse 11. "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 what we are doing by obeying the other three commands. As we flee unrighteousness and pursue righteousness, which is fighting the good fight of faith, what we are also doing is taking hold of eternal life. This is the reward that we are fighting for. This is the goal that we are striving for. And again, it's not something that we can do in our own strength. It is not something that we earn by fighting a good fight or by attaining some righteousness of our own. But as we wage the battle within our own souls to put away self-reliance and rest in Jesus Christ, we are taking hold of eternal life. Those who truly rest in Jesus and count Him their ultimate treasure, will inherit eternal life. This is the infinite reward that is bestowed on undeserving sinners like me and you—undeserving sinners who trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as our only hope of being forgiven for our sin. And to take hold of this reward we must be diligent to examine our hearts and to fight

the good fight of the faith to be sure that we are among that number of undeserving sinners who truly *are* trusting in Jesus.

The next statement is so encouraging, because these four commands have stressed our responsibility in living out the Christian life, but the verse now also highlights God's sovereignty over all of this. "Take hold of the eternal life *to which you were called.*" For those of us who are Christians, which is to say those who are fighting the good fight of the faith and taking hold of eternal life, God is the One who sovereignly called us to this. And He is the One who will see us through to the end. It is by His grace that we will persevere in this fight of faith and eventually enter His presence. In Philippians 2:12-13 there is a similar combination of exhortation grounded in God's sovereignty. There Paul writes, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

This is how we live out the Christian life. We flee unrighteousness. We pursue righteousness. We fight the good fight of the faith. We take hold of eternal life. We work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. And we do all of this recognizing that God is the One who called us to this, and He is the One who is working within us, enabling us to do all of this.

The verse closes with a reminder to Timothy of his commitment and obligation to the church. "and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." This could be a reference to Timothy's baptism or to his ordination. But in either case the point is to further bolster the seriousness of these exhortations with a reminder of the public declaration he has made of his commitment to Christ. Paul wants to further motivate Timothy by warning him against going back on the good confession he made in the presence of many witnesses.

I want to close with some inspiring and encouraging words from J. C. Ryle concerning the fight of faith. Ryle was a pastor in the 1800s in England, and these are some things he wrote about this text.

"Reader, settle it in your mind that the Christian fight is a good fight, really good, truly good, emphatically good. You see only part of it yet. You see the struggle, but not the end; you see the campaign, but not the reward; you see the cross, but not the crown. You see a few humble, broken-spirited, penitent, praying people, enduring hardships and despised by the world; but you see not the hand of God over them, the face of God smiling on them, the kingdom of glory prepared for them. These things are yet to be revealed. Judge not by appearances. There are more good things about the Christian warfare than you see." He also wrote, "No doubt you will often meet with trouble, fatigue, and hard fighting,

before your warfare is accomplished. But let none of these things move you. Greater is He that is for you than all they that be against you. Everlasting liberty or everlasting captivity are the alternatives before you. Choose liberty, and fight to the last.”

http://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/are_you_fighting.htm

Brothers and sisters, let's fight this good fight of the faith. And let us band together as a body of believers and be committed to helping one another persevere in this battle. Let's press on toward the reward, taking hold of eternal life. And as we come to the end of our lives I pray that we'll be able to say with the Apostle Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).