

Our Primary Focus: Positive not Negative

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But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses. {1Ti 6:11-12}

How easily we fall into the subtle trap of defining ourselves more by what we oppose than by what we approve. We can talk all day about what we oppose and say nothing about what we favor. I fear that we occasionally drift into this flaw much to our harm. A hungry man can talk for hours about all the foods that he dislikes, but he can also starve to death in the process. Only ingesting good nutritious food will satisfy his hunger. Our basic spiritual need-our hunger-can only be satisfied by spiritual food, not by emphasizing a long list of things we dislike. When we allow the negative emphasis to control our identity-even in our own minds-we are liable to attract more negative people than hungry truth-seekers who want to worship God.

We cannot emphasize too strongly the transformation that should be manifest in our lives because of our faith in Christ. Our American culture is saturated with people who claim to be Christian, but based on their responses to private surveys conducted by Christian organizations their moral and ethical compass barely differs at all from the unbelieving ordinary citizen. This fact is frightening. It predicts that robust Christianity may well not survive long in our culture. God shall surely preserve His truth, but He will do so among a people who respect it and honor its demands for a transformed life. We find a fascinating demonstration of this transformation in the identity of the apostles themselves. Prior to Jesus calling him to be an apostle, Matthew was a tax collector, a “publican.” Simon (not Peter) is identified as a “zealot,” a political insurrectionist who fought to drive the Romans out of Judah. If Matthew had continued being a tax collector and if Simon had continued being a zealot after their call to be apostles of the Lord Jesus, they would have likely spent so much time debating politics that they could not have focused their lives on their discipleship. Once we profess faith in Christ, that faith should define us, both in our own minds and in the eyes of others who see our attitudes and conduct clearly demonstrating our faith as our defining characteristic. Far too many Christians of all persuasions are perhaps more “hobby” Christians than serious “professional” Christians. They seek the identity and they likely want to live reasonably upright lives, but they don’t want to take their Christianity too seriously. As I write this chapter (May, 2004GG) recent news stories splashed the Catholic Church’s ruling that politicians who openly favor abortion will be denied Communion. In many instances the Roman Catholic Church leads society in moral issues. On the question of abortion Roman Catholic leadership has strongly opposed this evil, but many of the church’s members have simply ignored their church and both advocated and practiced it. If a person professes identity as a Christian, he/she should apply Biblical principles of conduct to every aspect of their life.

Paul has just concluded his warning about the intoxicating appeal of wealth, even to Christians. Now he cautions Timothy to avoid this error, to flee anything that might entice him to focus his life on money instead of his faith. Rather than following after wealth to the point of “piercing” himself through with many self-inflicted wounds, Paul urges Timothy to follow after the true wealth of spirituality; righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, and meekness. He is to “fight the good fight of faith,” not fight for his “share” of wealth. The energizing force in his life is to be eternal life, not the pursuit of money or envy toward those who have it.

“Greco-Roman moralists often described moral struggles in terms of warfare, as did Jewish texts influenced by them (e.g., 4 Maccabees, where it refers to martyrdom).⁸[1] The image in the Greek here is not that of a war, however, but of another image the moralists equally exploited in a figurative manner: the wrestling match or athletic contest.”⁹[2] True, the man of God is to fight, but his battle is

to be with his own appetites. “Vigor and intensity are suggested both in fleeing things that lead from the faith and in pursuing things pertaining to the faith.”^{10[3]} Paul would not have tolerated the “laid back” view and conduct of many professing Christians in our time who claim to be believers but who refuse to allow their faith to excite or to control them. For them it is a nice piece of jewelry, but it is not a good thing to live by in the trenches of life. How sad.

Paul’s term, “Fight the good fight of faith,” is a military term. Inherent in a successful military campaign are a number of factors that carry over into Paul’s imagery. First, no soldier fights alone. He is a member of a larger force of soldiers. How many people do you know who claim to be Christians but who never darken the door of a church, a claim that may be more fiction than fact? Secondly, soldiers on the battlefield serve under the directions of a commander. They do not simply “do their own thing” as they wish. They have been trained intensely in the strategies and skills of war. They go into the battle with clear instructions that they must follow throughout the engagement. We live in a time when many people claim to be Christians who believe that their conscience is the supreme court of every act they perform. Try suggesting that they serve under a specific “chain of command” as set forth in Scripture and defended in a local church and you will likely hear the rebellious “I answer to God alone. My faith is no one else’s business.”

Throughout Scripture, “faith” often appears in a context that strongly implies “faithfulness.” No where in the Bible do we see true faith as a simple mental outlook that carefully keeps itself out of one’s personal conduct. James’ whole treatise on dead faith, faith that produces no works, builds on this premise. When you sign a contract to buy merchandise on installment, somewhere in the terms of the contract you will agree that you enter this contract in “good faith,” with genuine intentions of paying the debt according to the terms of the contract. The claim of “faith” for a Christian is the equivalent of a “good faith” promise to live by one’s faith.

To “lay hold” on eternal life means to get in touch with it, “get a grip on it,” as we might say in our contemporary jargon. The term in this context has nothing to do with Timothy gaining his salvation. At this point he is a faithful believer and minister of the gospel, hardly the kind of person the Bible describes as unsaved. The dynamic power of God, of eternal life, along with all of its related and Biblical values, is to govern Timothy’s conduct and choices in life. He cannot serve as an honorable example to the church in Ephesus and do otherwise.

The word translated “patience” has the primary meaning of continuing endurance. It is often used with reference to remaining faithful through hardship when it would be easy-perhaps even understandable-to give up and walk away. The idea is that Timothy is to maintain his faithfulness through good times and bad. Whether his service is comfortable or full of distress, his charge before God is to remain under the command of the Lord Jesus as set forth in Scripture. Whether he wins the particular battle in Ephesus or not, he must remain faithful.

Good synonyms for “meekness” in this passage would be gentleness or mildness. Christians must lead something of a revolutionary lifestyle. They march to the beat of a different drum. However, they should not march to their drumbeat with defiance or arrogance toward others. We will only win those who view life differently by living our faith with winsome delight and kindness. During the six months from the time that I write this chapter till our national election, many Christians will cloud the distinction between their faith and their political party affiliation. Some will advocate fiercely for one party or candidate; some for another. And some will equally advocate abandonment of the whole system as hopelessly corrupt. They forget the lesson that we find in Matthew and Simon. May we practice our faith with such godly kindness as to appeal to outsiders rather than turn them off.

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