

June 23, 2024

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS IN THE FIGHT OF FAITH

1 Timothy 1:18-20

(3 of 15 in a series through 1 Timothy)

There are times it feels almost miraculous that anyone perseveres in the faith. I mean, think of everything that is going against us. We have an enemy who is seeking to fill our heads with lies and devour us at every turn. We have our own internal desires to sin. It is true that the Spirit now indwells us as believers and gives us good and godly desires, but the old desires of the flesh don't just go away. Paul tells us in Galatians 5:17 that "the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." And this is obviously something Paul would not need to say if the second we became believers all of our fleshly, sinful desires went away. Then, on top of all of that, we live in the midst of a culture that is modeling behavior that is at odds with the Scripture, attempting to make those things that are sinful and perverse feel normal.

And in addition to all of this, we deal with mockery and attack at times. We suffer through traumatic situations—involving our own sinful actions or the sinful actions of others against us—that can shake us to our core. And, finally (though I could add more), we face the failures of those whom we look up to and trust as they fail to persevere and walk away from Christ. I can think of stories involving only one of these challenging elements that led to a professing brother or sister to make shipwreck of their faith and walk away from the Lord.

Without the Spirit's empowering presence, preserving us to the end, we would certainly be hopeless. But at the same time, I don't want us to think that the Spirit acts irrespective of us. That is, God's sovereign, preserving grace doesn't in any way lessen or mitigate our responsibility to persevere in faith and walk in faithful obedience to our Lord. But that raises a question for us: how do we equip ourselves to fight the fight of faith? What weapons do we take up in the war that the enemy wages against our souls? I think this is where 1 Timothy 1:18-20 can be of help to us.

If you'll remember back a few weeks ago, as we looked at 1:1-11, Paul opens the letter by reminding Timothy of his task of proclaiming and protecting the truth that was handed down to him against "certain persons" in Ephesus who were teaching something contrary to sound doctrine rooted in the gospel. Then, in verses 12-17, Paul had pointed to the example of himself as a picture of why the gospel must not be distorted or turned away from, noting that the gospel alone can bring about the transformation that had taken place in Paul's very life. And now in verses 18-20, Paul returns the focus to Timothy's task of dealing with these false teachers and keeping the church from running after them. And as he addresses Timothy, he provides him with some notes for how we persevere in faith and faithfulness. This is what I want to highlight for us this morning. First, we must remember the Lord's grace and faithfulness toward us.

We must remember the Lord's grace and faithfulness toward us.

As Paul begins this section, he addresses Timothy in a very personal manner. He writes, “This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child” (v. 18a). Not only does he address Timothy by name, but he reminds him of their relationship. Paul sees Timothy as his child.

Now, obviously Timothy was not Paul’s literal son. But Paul had been the one to disciple Timothy in the gospel and its implications. Paul was his father in the faith, his spiritual father. And to Paul, there was simply no one whose heart he trusted more. He would write to the Philippians, “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy’s proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel” (Phil 2:19-22).

So as Paul writes these verses to Timothy, stressing their personal relationship as a spiritual father to his son, it’s a reminder of the grace of God that has been shown to Timothy. Like all of us, undeserving of God’s favor, the gospel had come to him and in that, God’s grace had been lavished on him. But Paul doesn’t stop there in reminding Timothy of God’s grace. He continues, “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” (v. 18).

Now, Paul doesn’t tell us exactly what these prophecies previously made about Timothy were. But we have some clues. So let’s see if we can put some things together. First, later in this letter, Paul will say to Timothy, “Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you” (1 Tim 4:14). This seems to be a reference to something akin to what we do in ordaining someone to the office of pastor. The elders, at some point, had gathered around Timothy and laid hands on him. And the reason I say it’s probably with reference to appointing Timothy to a role of pastor is because Paul will tell Timothy—in the context of talking about elders—“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands” (1 Tim 5:22). In other words, by saying, “Don’t be hasty in the laying on of hands,” he was telling Timothy not to appoint a man to the office of elder without feeling confident about his proven character, lest you find yourself responsible for sinful actions he’ll go on to commit. So, when Paul speaks of the prophecies made about Timothy, it was probably by the elders when they laid hands on Timothy, setting him aside to serve as an elder.

Second, notice the parallels between this picture and that of Paul’s own “ordination” of sorts in Acts 13:1-2. In that chapter, we read, “Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping 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).

Notice the parallels. Here, you have a group of men laying hands on Paul to appoint him to the task to which the Lord was directing him. And it seems that this moment too was accompanied by prophecy. First, we’re told that at the church in Antioch were “prophets and teachers,” and

when Luke tells us that “the Holy Spirit said,” my guess is that he means through these men who were prophesying. So, what Paul is referencing here with Timothy receiving prophecies about himself from the elders seems to line up very clearly with what had taken place with Paul and Barnabas at Antioch.

Finally, let me make one more observation. Paul mentions “prophecies” (plural) made about Timothy. So, this wasn’t the case where one elder was given prophetic insight, but the Spirit confirmed this prophetic insight to multiple ones.

Now, from here, we can only guess, but my guess is that as the elders set aside Timothy for the task of pastoral ministry, laying their hands on him, the Spirit gave many of them a clear picture of how Timothy would be used to faithfully proclaim and defend the gospel and they voiced this to Timothy. We can’t know if that’s precisely it, but we do know that these prophecies about Timothy were positive and were capable—in Paul’s mind—of strengthening Timothy to “wage the good warfare,” as he says in verse 18.

Again, my guess is that Paul is saying, “Remember who you are by the grace of God—my child in the faith—and remember what was prophesied about you by more than one elder, namely, that you’d be a faithful proclaimer and protector of the gospel (or something along those lines).” Regardless of the specifics, Paul is telling Timothy to remember the Lord’s grace shown to him in the past (through his conversion and these prophecies as he was appointed to pastoral ministry) in order to strengthen himself in the present to fight the fight of faith.

Those are the same weapons that you and I have at our disposal and can use in our own fight of faith as well. Do you feel anxious and tempted to give up or to allow your knees to buckle in light of what you’re facing presently? Well, remember the Lord’s grace he’s shown to you. Stop and actively bring it to mind. Meditate on it. Remember how he brought the gospel to you and opened your eyes to believe. Remember how he’s provided for you. Remember how he’s pulled you through situations you didn’t think you’d survive. Remember how he’s kept you from sinning. Now, no doubt the enemy is saying, “And remember all you’ve sinned.” And you can answer him by pointing him to Christ’s death and resurrection for you. But no matter how much any of us has sinned, there are many times the Lord has kept you from it. He’s shown you grace upon grace. And those moments of his past grace are meant to strengthen you so that by remembering them you can “wage the good warfare” in the fight of faith.

That’s the first thing that I want us to see as an essential element in the fight of faith. We must remember God’s grace and faithfulness that has been shown toward us. Second, we must hold on to the truth of Scripture and walk in holiness.

We must hold on to the truth of Scripture and walk in holiness

When we say, “Wage the good warfare,” as Paul says here, or “fight the fight of faith,” what are we exactly talking about? We could answer, “Persevering in the faith,” which would be a fine answer and is why I started this sermon talking about the need to do that very thing. But Paul

lays it out quite clearly by telling Timothy to “wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience” (v. 18b-19a). That is, fighting the fight of faith means “holding faith and a good conscience.”

So there are two elements Paul says that Timothy must hold to as he wages the good warfare, or perseveres in the fight of faith. He must hold to faith and to a good conscience. Commentators will tell us that by “faith,” Paul could be making reference to “the faith,” that is the content of what the Bible teaches. Or, he could be referencing merely to holding to faith, as in his trust in the Lord. But these two aspects of how we might understand “faith” aren’t sharply divided. The reason for this is because holding on to our trust in the Lord is our holding to trusting and believing what God has revealed in his word. In other words, persevering in faith requires us to persevere in believing *the* faith. And so the first thing that Timothy is instructed to do is to hold on to his trust in what God has revealed in his Word. Hold on to believing the gospel that the Scriptures proclaim. Hold on to believing the doctrines that the Scriptures put forth.

Second, Timothy must hold on to a good conscience. That is, he must seek to walk in holiness and not hold onto sin and hide it, rather than confessing it and turning from it. For the believer, we cannot hold onto sin and conceal sin while also walking with a good conscience. We will either constantly feel conviction, or we will harden our hearts from being sensitive to sin. David had experienced the first with his sin in the Bathsheba incident. Remember when he confesses his sin in Psalm 51? He said to the Lord, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (Ps 51:3). His sin was always there, always convicting. He had tried to ignore it and conceal it, but it didn’t work. And, if your sin isn’t always convicting, then that’s a worse sign. It’s evidence that your heart has been hardened through sin’s deceit so that you’re no longer sensitive to the conviction you should feel.

Paul charges Timothy not to hold onto his sin and conceal it but to aim for a good conscience. Walk in holiness, and when you sin, confess it and turn from it so that your conscience is clear.

These two things—holding to faith in what the Scripture says and walking in holiness with a good conscience—are precisely what we’re striving for in our faith for faith. This is our aim. We do not want to turn from believing and trusting in what the Bible says is true. And we do not want to turn from God’s commands about how we should live and pursue sin.

And I think that these two things fit together. If we turn from faith in what God’s Word reveals, it will ultimately show itself in sinful practices in our lives. And if we sin and try to hold onto our sin or conceal it, we will ultimately turn from believing the truth of God’s Word. This is why Don Carson says he would answer students who came to him saying that they were doubting the truthfulness or authority of the Bible by asking, “Who are you sleeping with?” The point is not that you can’t struggle with the authority of God’s Word unless you’re fornicating. But Carson had dealt with enough students to know that if you go down the road of sin and don’t want to let go of it, eventually you’ll begin to question or cast off the authority of God’s Word over your life.

And so this is what is meant by waging the good warfare or fighting the fight of faith. We are fighting to ensure that we continue to hold to faith in what God's Word says and to walk in holiness, confessing and repenting of sin as we go, so that we might walk with a good conscience. So, we're remembering God's grace and faithfulness to us. And we're holding on to faith in God's Word and pursuing holiness, confessing and repenting of sin in our lives. This is what Paul tells Timothy, and it's equally true for us. And, finally, we must unite ourselves with a local church willing to exercise discipline.

We must unite ourselves with a local church willing to exercise discipline

After telling Timothy what it looks like to fight the fight of faith—remembering God's grace and faithfulness and holding faith in Scripture and walking in holiness—Paul now turns his attention to a negative example, specifically noting two men who have not fought the good fight. He writes, "By rejecting this [i.e. holding faith and a good conscience], some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme" (vv. 19b-20).

Once more, as we read this, there are a lot of unanswered questions. We don't know precisely who these two men are. Alexander seems to be a somewhat common name. And though we do have reference to a Hymenaeus in 2 Timothy 2:17-18 who falsely taught the resurrection had already happened. But I don't know how much it adds to our understanding to identify this as the same person. We simply can't know for sure what precisely these two men were saying so that Paul saw it as blasphemy.

But we do know two things. First, these men had not given evidence of persevering in the faith by holding faith in God's truth and walking with a good conscience. And we know that because Paul references them as having "made shipwreck of their faith," which is a phrase telling us that they haven't given evidence of persevering in repentance and faith. And the other thing we know is that they'd become the objects of church discipline (i.e. excommunication). That is to say, they'd been removed from the church as failing to provide evidence that they're genuine believers.

Now, here is where one might say, "Wait a second. Where do we see that in the text?" After all, Paul says nothing explicitly about them being removed from the church or from the membership of the church, as we'd understand it. He simply says that they'd been "handed over to Satan."

And that's fair. However, Paul has used that picture of handing one over to Satan before, and in the only other case where he uses this wording, he's speaking of church discipline. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul writes to the church at Corinth to exhort them to remove a man from the church who was sleeping with his step mother, and he wrote to them specifically, "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 Cor 5:4-5).

So the idea is that we remove from the membership of the church the professing believer who is not giving evidence—whether in his doctrine or practice—that he knows the Lord. And hopefully, as he feels the loss of fellowship, he will find himself desiring to repent and be restored. Moreover, the reason this is pictured as handing one over to Satan is because you're being removed from the church and put back into the world, which is pictured in the Bible as the habitat of Satan. Or, if you're one of those nature show watchers like me, it's like a herd of animals kicking one out of the group and so making him susceptible to the attacks of the lion who roams at a distance, waiting to single out one from the herd.

But notice the redemptive hope that Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 5. He hands one over to Satan “for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” In other words, the goal of church discipline is that it might be redemptive. You have to think the same thing is present here in 1 Timothy 1:19-20. When Paul says, “That they may learn not to blaspheme,” it seems he's envisioning this act of church discipline hopefully having the effect of causing these two men to learn *and repent*. And so we see that church discipline, carried out when it is necessary, is a means of preserving one's soul—of causing one to endure in the faith. It's a painful means, but it is a means the Lord has given.

So, what does it look like to fight the good fight of faith so that we persevere? We regularly remember and reflect on God's grace and faithfulness shown to us so that we might be strengthened in the midst of our present struggles and anxieties. We hold our faith in the truth of God's Word and keep walking in holiness, confessing our sins and repenting of them so that we might walk with a good conscience instead of holding onto our sins and trying to conceal them. And it means that we connect ourselves to a local church that is willing to discipline us if necessary, seeing that as a means to call us back to preserving faith when we've lost our way and been deceived and hardened in our sin. Failing to do this is a willingness to say, “I do not need the Lord's ordained means of preserving his children.” Isn't that arrogant? Isn't that evidence that we're trying to be wiser than God? And, as a church, let's make sure that we are willing to obey God here, loving our brothers and sisters enough to do the hard thing and obey our Lord's prescribed means to preserve his children.

May the one who gave his Son to live, die, and be raised for us give us the grace to walk in these ways as a church as we march toward that celestial city. May he enable us to fight the fight of faith well. And may we proclaim our persevering faith now as we come to the table. Amen.