

February 21, 2010

"But as for You... Pursue, Fight and Take Hold"

This is our last message in a series on Timothy, and I am really going to miss him. Next week we start a series on Esther, which will be briefly interrupted for Easter, and we will get to know Esther, and Mordecai and the King and a fellow named Haman. But I find Timothy to be the most underrated and for me, one of the most beloved people in the bible. That's strange I guess, because we never really hear him speak! But as you read Paul's instructions to him – the fact of certain instructions – you know just how human this guy must have been, in all of his frailty and vulnerability. Here's a saint of the church we can touch, who has weaknesses, who needs counsel, encouragement, and sometimes a whack on the back. This guy is not, as John Stott says, a "stained-glass saint." He's real.

Like me! Like, you, too!

This morning, as we say goodbye to our friend Timothy, let's do it by seeing how we *can* be just like him, and receive the words that Paul gives him at the open, and at the very close of this letter – "O man of God... Grace be with you."

1 Timothy 6:11-21

<sup>11</sup> But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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, <sup>14</sup> to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>15</sup> which he will display at the proper time--he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, <sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. <sup>18</sup> They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, <sup>19</sup> thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

<sup>20</sup> O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called "knowledge," <sup>21</sup> for by professing it some have swerved from the faith. Grace be with you. (ESV)

I don't know if you've ever read any books or seen any of the movies about the Battle of the Bulge, the great German offensive that was intended to break through at the weakest point in the Allies' defenses in Belgium and France, and split the Americans in the south from the British in the North, and completely ruin their supply lines.

Like all battles, there were enormous periods of confusion on both sides. At one point, the Germans got the idea – it was actually Hitler's idea – to send some of their soldiers dressed in captured US Army uniforms and who could speak perfect English, out in captured US Army

February 21, 2010

vehicles to infiltrate General Patton's army at the rear of the Allied lines.<sup>1</sup> The idea was to confuse the enemy by having these men give out false orders, upset communications, and misdirect troops wherever possible.

And for a little while, it worked. General Patton wired back to General Eisenhower and told him that there were these Germans who could speak "perfect English... raising hell, cutting wires, turning road signs around, spooking whole divisions, and shoving a bulge into our defenses."

You can imagine what this did – how it threw the rules of engagement up in the air. How do you know who's on your side, and who is not? Will I fire or capture my own man in trying to get rid of the pretenders among us? The US Army saw spies and saboteurs everywhere, and had to make up their own rules of engagement.

There are times when there is just this kind of confusion in the church. We still have false teachers, and Christians lose track of whose side they're on, what they're fighting for, and who they're fighting against. Sometimes in the church, we even fire at random, and the sad result is that some Christians are seriously wounded by "friendly fire."

Fortunately, God has given a set of rules to his church to know what is what and who is who – rules of engagement, so that we can, as Paul tells Timothy here, "fight the good fight."

This morning we want to look at:

- How you fight the good fight
- How you win the fight
- Fighting, knowing that the battle is won.

**So first, how you fight the good fight.** The first thing any soldier needs to know is, what dangers he or she needs to avoid, right? Good soldiers know that a barren field is not always merely a barren field – there could be mines in those fields. And that a forest is not just a bunch of trees, but that the enemy could be hiding in those woods.

The first thing a Christian soldier must do is flee from sin. These words that Paul uses here, "But as for you," are one of Paul's standard refrains in the letters to Timothy and Titus, and every time these words appear, they have followed a description of the kind of ministry Timothy needed to avoid. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3, Paul says that "evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. *But as for you*, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it..."

You see the very same idea here in v. 20, when Paul says, "O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you."

---

<sup>1</sup> Operation Greif: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Greif](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Greif)

February 21, 2010

Leo the Great, who was the leader of the church in the 400's, gave the classic exegesis of this verse, which has been called the *Depositum custody*, or what it means to have custody of this deposit:

"What is meant by the deposit? That that which is committed to you, not that which is invented of you; that which you have received, not that which you have devised; a thing not of wit, but of learning; not of private assumption, but of public tradition: a thing brought to you, not brought forth of you; wherein you must not be an author, but a keeper; not a founder, but an observer; not a leader, but a follower. Keep the deposit."<sup>2</sup>

If you keep this in mind – and we're all tempted on this, are we not – you avoid a lot of minefields. Now I know there are those folks – those teachers – who say "I try to say nothing new." Sort of a neo-puritan approach that says old theology is always right. That's *not* what Leo is saying. God DOES still speak through his word. He is still a revealing, speaking God. But God is the one who is still speaking. Not you, not anyone else. *God* is the sole author. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of talk that pretends to be super-science or super-theology. Stay VERY close to the received apostolic tradition. Avoid what is Neo for the sake of being new. Stay close to the received sayings of Jesus and the preaching, teaching and confessions of the church, rather than what is falsely called "knowledge."

Later in 2nd Timothy, Paul tells him that "the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears ... and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (*But*) *as for you*, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist..." In this case, Paul wants Timothy to flee from the love of money. So flee from evil people, flee from false teachers, and now flee from greedy people. In other words, flee from sin. Don't walk, but run. Flee from greed, laziness and heresy. Real men, *flee!*

Now, men and women, what do YOU need to run from? You see, at different times and on different occasions, Paul says to Timothy, "But as for you...Flee!" And it's "flee" from different things. The implication is, YOU have things you need to flee from, o man or woman of God. So what are those things? Fighting the good fight means knowing when to retreat.

I was in a coffee shop in Arizona this week, and there was a Christian guy at the next table discipling another young guy, and one of the issues for him was that he is this new Christian, and he's got these friends that want to keep dragging him down and back into old ways. And the counsel was, "flee." You know, "love those people, but when they take you somewhere that you shouldn't go, flee." Retreat. Take-off. But get oughtta there! Do you see that this isn't change by attrition? You've got to run from it. The Christian has to be constantly ready to take evasive action.

Here is the problem: you can't take your old life, and then just "add faith." See what Paul says in verse 11: "Pursue righteousness, godliness, *faith*, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the *faith*." See, if you just add faith, you're still going in the same direction. You're not fleeing at all. Your faith will be subservient to your lifestyle. No Paul says you flee.

---

<sup>2</sup> (modernized) Sermon LXXXV.3 NPNF 2 XII, 198

February 21, 2010

But, he also says *pursue*. You see, if all we ever do is beat a hasty retreat, we'll run from one sin into the arms of another. Instead of spiritual maturity, you'll have spiritual whiplash. How many of us does this describe? We run from one set of desires to another without ever pursuing anything intentionally. No, you flee the unrighteous – but pursue the righteous. Flee the godless, but pursue the godly. If you go in the same direction you were, you're not a man or woman of God. To be a man of God you have to flee "that stuff" and "pursue this stuff." Replace the don'ts with the dos. Some of us – and we know it – we need to make some profound changes to run away from sin. What is it for you? Is it drinking, gossip, fits of rage, lust... what is it?

But let's look at pursuit.

Now you would be surprised at how many of us think that if we have successfully fled from some pretty bad stuff, that that makes us okay. There are two problems with this – the myth of neutrality, and salvation by works.

Look, you can throw your computer out, cut up your credit cards, put a padlock on your refrigerator, or even do as Jesus suggests, and cut your arm off if it causes you to sin. You can sit on the couch all day and just watch old *I Love Lucy* episodes and pretend that you've avoided sin – that you've reached this neutral place, and that you no longer sin.

Doesn't work. There *is no* neutral place. The problem is, the heart is active. As we've said, the heart is always speaking. You would be amazed at how you can sin, just sitting in your pajamas watching endless *I Love Lucy* reruns. No, you need to turn from, and then turn to something else. You need to not only put off, but put on. You need to flee and then pursue.

This is how you fight. Flee unrighteousness and pursue what is righteous. You know, we have to think this through clearly, especially so that our kids understand. We tell our kids – we make the blanket statement – "don't fight." But no, the Christian must be able to engage in a *certain kind* of fight. Are your kids ready? The bible says that the world, the flesh and the devil are after all of us, including our children – in terms of the world and the flesh, I would say *especially* our children. Are your kids ready to fight? If certain kinds of material come on the television, or a computer screen, and your children simply sit there watching it... they're not yet ready to fight. They should be able to say, "I'm not allowed to watch that; that's wrong." Other sinners are opposing you, your own flesh is a problem, and the evil one knows this and you should too: If you don't flee, you WILL succumb. If you don't pursue, you WILL languish. If you don't fight when you are being attacked, YOU WILL LOSE. An army that doesn't have the courage to fight must either surrender or be defeated.

Now don't misread me! Don't go home and pick a fight with your spouse, your brother or your sister. That's not what we mean. Fight your *enemy*. And to do that, *you need to know who your enemy is*. Flee *those* things – the love of money, discontent, foolish desires, dissension and false doctrine – and then continue the fight by what you pursue: "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness."

February 21, 2010

## **Second, how do you win the fight:**

This is extremely important: Paul doesn't just throw this as a command to Timothy, but he reminds him of his identity when he says, "O Man of God."

You know, in The Battle of the Bulge, when those false Americans – the German imposters – were turning everything upside down, they finally rooted them out by asking each and every man in uniform if they knew the unit password and their soldier serial number. They either had an identity or they didn't.

Paul gives Timothy an identity right here. The expression "man of God," in the Old Testament, is only used of a very few people. Distinguished leaders like Moses, David, and as we heard earlier, Elijah. But in the New Testament, "man of God" is a title that is used of every church leader who is in Christ. One preacher I know encourages men to get a Sharpie and write this in their underwear. The idea is, what's the first thing you do in the morning? Put your underwear on! And you need to be reminded of who you are. And that even if you don't feel like it, maybe you'll see it and believe it. And if there is someone in the house who helps out by doing the wash, they'll see it too, and remind you to be a "Man of God" when you're not acting like it. When they say, "Is that what a 'Man of God' acts like?" Let me tell you, when they say this to you, it WILL change your behavior, and men, it may even change your hygiene, because you'll be reasonably sure that anyone who would say that has recently seen your underwear!

So what does this mean for you? Well, man or woman, boy or girl, get ye a Sharpie!

But seriously, how do you win the fight? Especially if you feel like you've been pummeled and keep falling down, whether by the world, or the flesh or the devil?

Not long ago – maybe you saw it – there was a reality show on television where an atheist was placed in the home of an American evangelical Christian family. The idea was that she would live in a home for 30 days with a group of people she had nothing in common with. These were people who were the antithesis of who she was and what she believed. And she was a great choice – these shows of course are never "reality"; producers choose who to put into a home like this – because she was contrarian, argumentative, and always ready for a fight. On one episode, she accompanied the family to their weekly bible study, and the subject was assurance. And at the end of the meeting, she asked everyone there if they thought they were going to go to heaven when they died.

And all I can say is, this was a group that was not prepared to fight. And look, by this I don't mean have a verbal fight. I mean that they were not ready to give a defense for the hope that they had. Because each of these people, sitting there with bibles open on their laps, could not answer this woman's question. Some fumbled around trying to speak about what faith was; others tried to speak about evidences. But none of them was able to clearly express a basis, a solid foundation, for why they would go to heaven.

February 21, 2010

Now in a way, struggling with assurance is not unusual. Great Christians – read their biographies – they all had struggles with assurance. But the difference is that these great saints that you read about in the history books – they struggled because they looked into their own hearts and saw the remaining sin that was there and the unbelief that still resided there. But this group on TV, their problem was that they had forgotten what they knew. They forgot that their assurance wasn't based on their faith, but rather their faith in Christ Jesus.

Paul says, "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." Now, some say that Paul is talking about Timothy's ordination, but others say this is about Timothy's baptism – Timothy was a Greek who came to faith by Paul's preaching. And I think this is right, because what is mentioned here is the call to eternal life itself. Winning the fight means knowing in whom your hope lies. Timothy has the assurance of eternal life because he was called to receive it by God's own Spirit. God's call is like a military summons: it has an irresistible, saving power on God's chosen people. Now Timothy answered that call when he "made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses."

We've got to move quickly, but this is big, and it is so dismissed in our culture. We live in a culture ruled by subjective feelings and personal decisions. You choose, you decide, and the culture promises that you can be who you want to be. We disdain any kind of cultural situation where we are told what to do. I was sitting around a campfire 2 weeks ago with some Cub Scout dads, and somehow we got onto the subject of marriage, and the conversation got real quiet when one dad – an Indian fellow – said that his marriage had been arranged. Why the quiet? People just think that's ... not... right. "What about your subjective feelings and personal decisions, man?"

But listen, this isn't just anyone deciding for you. This isn't your guidance counselor saying, "Uncle Sam wants YOU!" or your parents saying, "We've arranged a marriage for you." This is the "Wonderful Counselor." This is your "Heavenly Father." You need something *Objective*. You need something more solid than your feelings which change moment by moment. This is the *perfect* choice. It is **God** that summoned you precisely to this battle. You committed yourself to this struggle when you made your confession. Cling to it. Hold to it. Fan it into flame. But live it out, because God himself called you to this.

And you see, the reason you know that you can win this fight is that it's not just many witnesses that publically witnessed God's call upon your life, but Paul takes Timothy right then and there into the holy of holies – he's always doing this! – and says, "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, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

What's the point here? Paul's point is, your Commander-In-Chief made good on his own confession. Jesus was put on show – the ultimate reality show – in front of an atheist named Pontius Pilate, and made good. We said it this morning in the Nicene Creed: "He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate." What do we mean by that? Jesus' testimony was with words – he told Pilate he came to bear witness to the truth – but he testified to the world he IS the truth, and

February 21, 2010

he ratified this with his own blood. Friends, the point is, when you waver, when you're down on the mat, when you fall again and again at the hands of the world, the flesh or the devil, look to your Commander-In-Chief and his confession made with his own body and blood. That is where assurance comes from. It's how you win the fight. Look to him.

**Now Finally**, knowing the battle is won.

I don't know if you caught this. But when Paul tells Timothy to "take hold of the eternal life to which you were called," he's simply telling Timothy to do what he has done. In Philippians 3:12, Paul said, "Not that I have *already* obtained this or am *already* perfect, **but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...**"

Now this is interesting. Do you hear the paradox there? "Not that I have *already* obtained this or am *already* perfect, **but I press on (now) to take hold (now – present tense) of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...**

It's the same thing here. Take hold, Timothy, *of eternal life*. Well, eternal life is a future thing, right? How can you take hold of something future? It's as if I told the students here, "take hold of graduation." You'd say, "What? I've still got exams, a thesis, papers to write!"

But here is what Paul means: "**Help is on the way. Reinforcements are coming.**"

You remember that illustration I've used before by the theologian Oscar Cullman? Cullman would say that the Christian life is like this – we live between the time of D-Day – the landing on Omaha Beach – and VE day when the tanks rolled into Berlin and Germany surrendered. Now Cullman's point was that World War II was essentially won as soon as the Allies successfully took control of Omaha beach. The darkness, shadows and dread lifted right then.

But the allies still needed to battle on until the they reached Germany because evil was *not yet* entirely flushed out. That is the life of the Christian. It is an already (war is won) not-yet (the battle still rages) existence.

And that is exactly how you know you can fight. Because the war is won. It is all but over. Paul says at the beginning of our passage, "O man of God, fight the good fight," but he ends it – ends the letter with – "Grace be with you."

You see, every other religion tells you what to do: "Try harder." "Pursue, fight, take hold." Paul even does that! But "Pursue, fight, take hold" *alone* is religion. Christianity does not only tell you what to do, and keep telling you "not yet!" "Try harder." No Christianity tells you what's *already* been done. You ARE saved, by God's grace. The battle is ALREADY won.

You can't earn it, accomplish it, merit it, fight for it. It's not yours to get because you are a sinner.

BUT, the commander-in-chief came. And he came without sin. He died for sin. He rose for sin. He forgave sin. And he puts sin to death in his victory. Only he could do it, and it's done.

February 21, 2010

All you need to do is take hold of what HE has done. All you need to do is RECEIVE what he has accomplished. Receive the gift!

Now THAT, friends, is the gracious deposit Paul wants Timothy to guard. Now that might seem easy. I can guard a free gift! But you would be surprised how many people fall back into thinking that victory can only be theirs – that they can only have full assurance – if THEY accomplish it. That is irreverent babble. And you know, we have that babble going on in our own heads! It sounds right sometimes, but it is "false knowledge." To believe in your own works will mean you DO swerve from the faith, because your eyes are not on the commander-in-chief anymore. They're on you.

Think about a soldier fighting his way to Berlin, thinking that winning the war is on his shoulders. That pack, that pressure, will weigh him down and crush him with discouragement. Jesus says, my yoke is easy and my burden is light because HE made himself the beast of burden. That's grace. He lifts that weight off your shoulders.

Are you humble enough to ask God for that grace? It will be hard! The Christian life is a battle. But it will be easy and light compared to the power of sin. Because that will lead to death and not victory.

Ask Jesus to give you that. Receive him. Take hold of what he's done. Grace be with you!

Let's pray.