

Fight the Good Fight

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 June 2022

Preacher: Cory Brock

[0 : 00] Well, we've been marching through Paul's letter to the very young pastor Timothy in Ephesus for the past couple of months.

And Paul has been talking every single week about how the family of God, the church, should live together. And the big couple of things that he said is that we've got to stick like glue to the truth as God has revealed it in the Bible.

And so we said week one, Paul wants us to be truth people. And that truth then has to affect the heart and produce change and growth. And so he said truth has always got to issue forth in love. So truth people and love people. In other words, the Christian cannot live the normal life of the kingdom of this world, there's got to live a life that looks like the kingdom of God already in the now. And we come to the close of this letter. This is the penultimate section. We'll just have one more week. And Paul's getting to the crescendo of all that he's had to say.

[1 : 13] And if you were to say, Paul, what is on your mind as you close down this letter and this long letter, but also sermon really about what the church should look like and live like the same thing is on his mind at the end that he started with.

And that's that he wants Ephesus and he wants St. Columbus to be all about the life of the mind toward God and the life of the heart toward God. Truth people and love people.

It's all right here in the last chapter as well all over again. And so to say that, he says very famously, fight the good fight of the faith.

And the question we have this morning is what does that mean? And so let's explore that. Let's see three things about fighting the good fight. And first is we'll look at the call to fight.

Secondly, the charge to keep. And lastly, the reason for both. So first, the call to fight.

[2 : 14] Paul starts in verse 11, knowing that we've got a problem. He's about to tell us to flee something and he knows that we have a problem and he's talking here to professing Christians and specifically about the problem that professing Christians have.

Martin Luther in the time of the Reformation in the early 1500s captured the problem that Paul is talking about here really well. Luther was a monk and he was trained to think only in Latin.

And so he wrote this very famous Latin phrase to capture the problem. He said that Christians are simile Eustace at picator, that we are simultaneously justified and sinners at the same time.

And what he was saying is that if you profess faith in Jesus, you are legally, before God the Father, free of your sin. You're guilt free. You've died with Christ.

You've risen with Christ. In the eyes of God, you are not a sinner legally, but you are at the same time a sinner. And you've still got the kingdom of this world down in your bones.

[3 : 25] Paul calls it the sinful passions of the flesh and it's still there. We're simultaneously justified and yet sinners. And so Paul knows practically that we're still in a space where we're really struggling to be what God has proclaimed us to be in Christ Jesus and the way we actually live our lives and the way our heart is actually changed on the ground.

But what he's saying here is that justification being legally sin free has got to give birth to sanctification growth in our lives that we've got to change. We've got to grow.

And Paul comes here and says that that's our struggle that we're simultaneously justified, but we're sinful and we're struggling with sin. And so after you profess, I believe, Crayto, I believe Paul says now the fight begins.

The fight has to start. And it's not a fight to get a seat at the table of God. Instead, the fight is that you've got a seat at the table of God and now we're called to put off the old self to become like the God whose table we sit at.

And that's what he's dealing with here. And so over and over, Paul says, you know, don't let sin overwhelm your faith. And you've got the desires of the world deep down in your heart and in your bones.

[4 : 52] And so three times, three times in this letter and in second time, if the Paul will say the same thing, the very famous phrase, fight the good fight.

And this is the second time he said it in this letter, in this letter of 1 Timothy. And it's, you know, it's a good fight.

And that's important because not all fights are good. And he's already told us multiple times in this letter, a lot of you in Ephesus are fighting in bad ways.

You're quarrelsome. You create controversies about every little thing. That's not the good fight. But there is a good fight and the good fight is the fight for your life.

It's the fight for your heart. The good fight is the fight for holiness. And that's the exact fight that he's talking about here. And so just a simple diagnostic question as we start.

[5 : 49] And it's obvious. It's, are you in the fight? You know, are you in the fight today right now for the life of your heart? Are you struggling with the sinful passions that are still in you as a professing, as a professional Christian?

Or do you find yourself on the sidelines? And the question is then, how do you know am I in the fight or am I on the sideline?

And this is exactly what he's going to tell us. He's going to tell us that the fight has two elements to it. Okay. First, the fight means, if you're in the fight, the first thing is that you're running away from something.

And if you're in the fight, secondly, you're also running to something. You're chasing after something. And that's exactly what he says. Psychologists will regularly point out that human beings have a very natural instinct.

We call that the fight or flight instinct. And you know, whenever you approach a circumstance of immense danger, sometimes you need to run away.

[6 : 51] That's the only option you have. Sometimes you need to stay and fight. That's the only option you have. Your instinct triggers and your adrenaline pumps and you know you're going to run or you're going to fight.

And Paul comes to the Christian and says the answer is yes. That the Christian has to run and stay and fight. You have to be defensive and offensive.

There's something to defend yourself from. There's something to get on the offensive about in the Christian life. And that's what he unpacks here. And so the first thing he says in verse 11 is that we have to run away.

He says, man of God, woman of God, flee these things. Run away from these things. That's the negative side of the fight.

And of course we can ask, what are these things, Paul? What is it that you're telling us to run away from? And that's really what he's been unpacking last week in verse, in the whole of chapter six up to this point.

[7 : 50] But just to review that very quickly. He says at the beginning of chapter six, one of the things to run away from is a growing pride deep down in the heart that starts to say that God's word isn't what it really says it is.

And we could call this, we could call this Paul's command to flee from theological liberalism. That's one of the things he's been treating in the whole book. He's saying run away whenever you start to sense in your own life or you see in your church or you see outside of you, a theology that's being constructed starting with your own personal desires or starting with the cultural demands out in the world.

When theology is being built and that's the foundation, he says run away from that. You got to get away. You got to run away from that. That's one of the things he tells. In other words, protect the life of your mind from the ideas that are contrary to the word of God.

The second thing in chapter six he had said was run away from the love of money, from obsession with money. And in other words, run away, flee from being dominated by anything that is more important to you than God is.

And that's us. We love stuff more than we love God so often. And so he says run away when you have a sense that money, power, prestige, family, children, security, safety, wealth, whatever it may

be, when that is more, when you sense this, I think this is more important to me than God is, he says you got to run, you got to run away from that.

[9 : 25] You got to run away from that thing. But we can be even more simple than that. The Christian life that is marked by growth, by marked by the fight is simply one, Paul says, that is running away from sin.

It's that simple. Run away from sin. That's all he really means here. And John Owen, the English Puritan, very famously said, kill your sin, lest your sin be killing you.

And step one in that is to run away from sin, flee from the sin that's in your life. I saw Top Gun this week and it was fantastic.

And I learned from Top Gun that we need evasive maneuvers. We've got to run from sin. And John Bunyan read the pilgrim's progress.

And at the very beginning of the pilgrim's progress, Christian, who is the main character, he lives his life in the city of this world, is how Bunyan puts it.

[10 : 32] And then evangelist comes to him and says, go Christian and flee to a better city. And Christian says to the evangelist, I cannot see the gate of the city you're talking about.

It's too far in the distance. It's too cloudy. I can't see the gate of the city that you want me to run to. And so evangelist says, don't worry about that.

You just need to run. I know that you can't see the end point, but just start running. In other words, he says, the Christian life, Christian, is one where you have put sin at your back and not that it's not gaining up on you and grabbing you all the time, but that at least you're in the fight.

You're saying sin is now at my back. My life is not a place that is hospitable to sin any longer. And so that's the first thing Paul says is run away from something.

Now that's the negative side, but there's a positive side. He turns to the positive side in verses 11 and 12. We not only run from sin, but we've also got to run to something, chase after something.

[11 : 41] And you can see the language of that verse 12 when he says fight, sorry, verse 11 as well, flee from something, but also pursue. That's the verb.

So he action verbs all over this, this section, flee now pursue chase after something verse 12. He says, take hold of something. Now before I tell you exactly what that something is, it's just worth mentioning that at the very beginning of the passage, verse 11, he says he titles the Christian that's in the fight man of God or woman of God.

And he's going to use this same exact phrase, not only for Timothy here, but also for any Christian in second Timothy 3 17. This is Paul's favorite thing to say. He says, if you're a man or a woman or God, a woman of God, that means that you're a Christian who's seeking maturity in both the life of the mind and the life of the heart.

You're running from sin. You're running to something. And Paul actually says in second Timothy that it's a great honor. It's a great honor to be a man of God or a woman of God. And you've, many of you have probably been to funerals where the preacher stood up in the pulpit and talked about the person that had died and they said that this was a man of God or this was a woman of God and everybody, you look around the room and everybody kind of nods, you know, you know, that everybody knew that was a man of God.

That was a woman of God. And Timothy Paul says here that this is exactly what we're describing is what it, what it means to be a man of God or a woman of God.

[13 : 26] Jay Gresham Machen was an American theologian at Princeton, Princeton Seminary. And he in the 1920s, he left Princeton Seminary because he felt like Princeton was struggling with not being faithful to the Bible.

And when he died, and I don't know a ton about Machen's life, so I can't testify how true this is. But when he died, what they put on his tombstone was Revelation 2.17, they said, a man faithful to the end, a man of God.

And that's exactly what Paul is trying to describe to us here. And so he says the man of God, the woman of God has to run from sin, but they're chasing after something. And what is it?

And he gets very specific here about what they're chasing after in verse 11. That's what John, John Stott calls the hot pursuit of goodness.

And in verse 11, he says, pursue six things. And actually these six things, righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfast, and be steadfast and gentle are actually three things.

[14 : 33] They're presented in Greek and couplets. So the first two are righteousness and godliness. They go together. And we won't say but two sentences about each of these.

But Paul says the Christian life, the man of God, the woman of God is running from sin, chasing after godliness. And godliness here, righteousness here simply means chasing after what God says is good.

What people have called the Godward life, what people used to call the life of true religion or piety. And that's, it's very simple. It's just that the man, the woman lives for God and wants to live a life that God says is good.

And it's a certain mark of devotion, a life devoted to God. And then the second couplet, faith and love. And here, faith here I think means trust.

And so what it's saying is that the man or woman of God has trust where the consistent pursuit of godliness is precisely because I believe in what I cannot yet see.

[15 : 42] I trust and hope in something that I know is not yet visible to me. And so love pours forth because I got love from Christ so I issue forth in love.

And then the third couplet, to be steadfast and gentle. Steadfast and gentle are both forms of patience actually and to be steadfast is to be patient in hard circumstances and to be gentle is to be patient with hard people.

And so Paul says very specifically, the Christian life chase after godliness in trust in what you cannot see with patience.

That's what he says very specifically. And he puts it more generally in verse 12 when he says that what you're chasing after you grasp hold of, take hold of eternal life.

In doing these things, you're actually reaching out and you're grabbing eternal life. And you've got to be very careful and you've got to look at what he says very carefully because he says take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.

[16 : 51] Meaning he says reach out and grab hold of eternal life in the way you live your life. But that doesn't mean reach out in order that if you're gentle enough and steadfast enough and godly enough maybe god would give you eternal life.

That's not what it's saying. It's saying you were called to eternal life. That's already secure. So now take hold of it. In other words, right now in this life, take hold of the eternal life that you have in Jesus Christ that is to come today.

Grab it because you have it. So grab hold of it and take it and live like it. And so this is the good fight. This is what Paul means when he says fight the good fight.

You've got, we're called Christian today to be like the fugitive where you've broken free and you're always, for the rest of your life, you're going to be a fugitive.

You're always going to be running away from the kingdom of this world. It's never going to stop until the day you die. You've got to be like Harrison Ford at his best or Tom Cruise, top gun.

[17 : 56] You've got to be running your entire life away from sin. And then at the same time, you've got to be in the hot pursuit, the hot pursuit of goodness, the life of God, a Godward life, taking hold of eternal life today.

A life today that reflects and witnesses to the life that is to come in the kingdom that is to come.

Before we move on and points two and three are very brief, but before we move on, I just want to mention that fight, the word fight here is a metaphor, of course.

And it's a metaphor that the commentators will say is very likely referencing Greco-Roman wrestling match. Okay. So Paul probably has in mind a one on one Greco-Roman wrestling match in a little arena.

And that means that Paul here uses two metaphors to describe what it's like to live life as a Christian. The one is obvious. It's running, racing. So on the one hand, he's saying you've got to be Usain Bolt.

You got to run away from your sin as fast as you can. And you got to run towards the godliness as fast as you can. But that dialectic where that tension where sin is always at your back, but it's chasing you, it's trying to get your heart.

[19 : 13] And you've got something out in front of your face, which is the Christ and his example that you're always running towards. That tension is reflected so well in the other metaphor, which is wrestling.

So it's like you're always, sometimes sin has got you in a headlock on the Greco-Roman floor of the wrestling match. And then sometimes you break free and you pin it down.

But what he's saying here is when you're fighting the good fight, you're wrestling. You are at least in the struggle. Are you in the struggle? Are you fighting?

Are you wrestling? Are you saying sin does not have a home here anymore? And so sometimes you might be losing, but you're wrestling. You see what Paul picks this metaphor?

Wrestle today. Don't let this moment pass by to at least examine yourself and ask, am I wrestling, struggling and fighting for the life of my mind and my heart against sin?

[20 : 15] Am I fighting for godliness? Be in the struggle. That's what fight the good fight means. All right. Secondly, and very briefly, Paul knows how hard this is and how serious this is.

And so what he does is he gives us a charge and you can see it. He starts with it in verse 12 and then really gives it in 13. I charge you.

And this is now Paul is saying, I am Paul saying I am the coach, the wrestling coach on the side watching this wrestling match. And I'm yelling at you.

I'm giving you orders. I'm telling you exactly what to do. Remember that our problem is that you profess faith in Jesus. You still got the world in your bones.

And so you're still struggling. You still, if you're like me today, you hear everything we've already looked at and you say, you know, I know for me that I want what I should be running away from and I run away from what I should be desiring.

[21 : 22] That's what I learned from the first section. I run from, I run from what I should be wanting and I want what I should be running from. And so Paul says, he's already told us sometimes our conscience gets cauterized and burned and Augustine says, we've got disordered loves.

We want things in the wrong order and badly we want the wrong things. And Paul says, I know that your desires are all out of whack. And so I charge you, you know, Paul's doing us such a favor here because what he's saying is if you need, you need all the help you can get.

So listen, I'm telling you, this is a command. And so how kind that is to say, God says, I command you to do that. I command you to get into the struggle.

I command you to be a person that's in the midst of the fight. John Stott puts it, he talks about how simple it is. He says, when it comes to being in the fight here, there's no particular secret to learn. There's no formula to recite. There's no technique to master. The apostle gives us no teaching on holiness, quote unquote, and how to attain it in any specific way.

[22 : 40] We are simply to do this, run from evil, run from danger and run after goodness. That's it. It's simple. And yet it is so hard.

And for some of us, our apathy is the overpowering factor right now in the midst of this. And in difference, and Paul's saying, I know that you need power today to step back into the fight.

And so here's step one of that power. I command you. I charge you. Get back in the fight today. And when he gives that charge, he says in verse 14, keep the commandment, which is the command to fight.

This is the command that he's talking about. And he says, I charge you to hold fast to the good confession you made. And so here this, he says, keep hold of the confession, the profession that you've made.

Talking about when you profess faith, you were baptized. Hold to that. Hold to the profession. Grab hold of it. Take it up. Live through it and in it. But then he says, here's the real power.

[23 : 47] And did you notice where he goes with it? He says, I charge you today in the presence of Jesus Christ to keep the commandment. And then he says, because he made the good confession before punches pilot.

And you see, Paul knows how hard this is. And he knows that of your own resources, you're going to leave the fight. And so he says, today, here's the charge.

Today you stand in the presence of Jesus Christ and remember where your power comes from. He made a confession too. He made a profession.

And he did it where Paul says he did it before punches pilot. Now this is talking about in the gospels when Jesus was brought, he was dragged to punches pilot to this Roman courtroom.

And he stood before this very local governor who had very little power in real life. And this governor became the judge.

[24 : 50] PUNCHES pilot became the judge. Jesus Christ, the judge of all the earth stood in the seat of the accused. And punches pilot stood in the seat of the judge.

And he said, are you the king? And Jesus said, you have said it. And pilot said, behold the man. And the reason that this was happening, despite the fact that pilot did not want this, he didn't want Jesus to be there. He didn't want the court to meet none of it. It's because the religious leaders that wanted Jesus killed, they dragged him to punches pilot.

Because when pilot said, I don't want anything to do with this, try him in your own court. They said, pilot, only you have the power in this region to sentence a man to death.

And they said, we need you. If you will not try Jesus, then we can't kill him. And we need him to die. And so we need you to take up this case.

[25 : 55] And so you see, before the religious leaders, they said, Jesus is a blasphemer because he claims to be God. That was his confession.

And then before pilot, they all heard it. He said, you hear that? He said he was king. And so pilot's hands were tied. That's what they were saying. He is claimed before your face to be king, meaning he's not only committed blasphemy, he's committed treason against Caesar.

And so he has to be punished capital. He has to be murdered. He has to be tried and committed unto death. And so pilot still did not, he still wanted out.

And so what he did was he took the king and he set him next to Barabbas in the open square. And he said, look, I will release Jesus. You can have him back.

This king of yours, or you can have Barabbas, this horrible criminal. And this man who's not done anything or this man, and they shouted, we want Barabbas, kill him and give us Barabbas.

[27 : 00] And you see what was happening in that moment. The innocent one would go to death so that the guilty man may go free. And if you're a Christian today, you are Barabbas.

The innocent one went to die so that you might go free. And you see what Paul's saying? Paul's saying Jesus went to the court and he made his confession.

And his confession was I am God and I am king. So take my life. You see, he's saying he made his confession so that you could be Barabbas, so that you could walk away so that you could go free.

And so he says today, step back into the fight. Remember that you've professed faith, but remember that the only power you have to stick to it is because Jesus Christ also made a profession in the courtroom.

And his profession was that he is the king and he is God and he knew that it would kill him. And he did it. In other words, you can struggle today to run away from sin, to take hold of that which is good precisely because Christ is with you.

[28 : 10] And the reason he is with you is because nobody was with him. Not that day. He was all alone so that he could be with you, so that you can have power to step back into the fight.

And so in 2 Timothy 4, Paul says, I have fought the good fight. I have run the race. I've wrestled and I've run to the finish line, but he says only Jesus can carry me across the line.

And you see, it's only because Jesus Christ lets and dominate him that you now can have the power to dominate sin in your life. And so thirdly and finally, hear this charge.

Let the charge wash over you this morning and hear it again as you step back out into your normal work week. And hear it lastly underneath just the reason for both.

And here Paul at the very end of the passage, he breaks out into a doxology. This doxology is very famous if you buy any theological textbook of any sort versus 15 and 16 will be quoted in about 100 times.

[29 : 30] He says that God is the only king, power above all powers. He's the one who dwells in unapproachable light. The point however here is not academic knowledge.

It's not really to construct a grand theology, but he includes this. Why does Paul break into doxology about God at the end of this? And the reason is he's saying this.

Step back into the fight today. But the reason, the reason, discipline is not for the sake of discipline. Killing your sin is not for the sake of killing your sin.

Chasing after good, the good is not for the sake of chasing after the good. He says the reason to step back into the fight today and to hear the command to fight for the life of your heart is to see God.

That's why he breaks out into doxology. He says don't let a quiet time in the morning be a reason to do a quiet time in the morning.

[30 : 36] Don't tick boxes. Don't care about any of that. Don't worry about that stuff. That doesn't matter. Instead wake up early in the morning to chase after God, to desire God, to pray and seek the face of God.

Don't do a quiet time. Seek the face of God. God is the reason for getting back into the fight. God is the reason for doing the fight at all because knowing God today and getting God, that is the reason. And so very quickly, we'll just take two minutes on this. This is what Paul says. He says in verse 13, one, here's three specific reasons. One, verse 13, you stand in the presence of God, specifically in the presence of Christ today.

So Paul knew very well all of us at all moments of our life. And Corum deo, before the face of God, God sees the heart absolutely.

And so he's saying, number one, live today as if God is with you because he is. Number two, 15b, he is the, God is the blessed and only ruler, the king of kings, the Lord of lords.

[31 : 51] God is above every earthly power. He has not only absolute presence in your life. He is the absolute power over all existence. And so he's saying fight the good fight because living for him is not relative, like living for the little gods of this life.

They come, they go, they break your heart when they leave. He doesn't do that. He's absolute power. And then thirdly and finally, he dwells in unapproachable light.

Not only can you not see him, but his dwelling is so unapproachable for us because of his holiness. His holiness is so great. It's greater than we can conceive of any greatness.

And this is it. Exodus 33:20, because of the holiness of God, no one can see God and live. Nobody. You cannot see God and live.

But then he comes to us and says, but chase after him, pursue him, seek him, put on in your life right now the eternal life that is to come, be holy, change, grow.

[32 : 56] Why? And it's John 1.18. John 1.18 says nobody has seen God, but Jesus Christ has made him known.

And he said, you were made to see God. You were made to change for God. You were made to experience God even in today, even by faith, not by sight. And all of it is because the God that you cannot see, the God is that too holy for you to approach, Jesus Christ has made him known.

He's come down to see you. And that means that God must be our life today because he shall be our life in the future.

And our eyes will see him, Jesus Christ. Our eyes will see the living God. And so the charge again will give Paul the last word.

He says, I charge you today to fight the good fight of the faith. Today, in our time in just a moment in prayer, pursue the face of God, enter the struggle as you step into prepare so that tomorrow you don't just come to do a quiet time.

[34 : 10] You come to seek the living God and to be in the midst of his presence and to let his spirit change your desires.

So let's pray for that now. Father, we ask that you would change us. And we ask, Lord, that instead of wanting the things of this world more than you, that you would change our desires so that we would want you more than the things of this world.

And we confess our apathy in the midst of the struggle. And so we ask, Lord, that you would help us to see how serious your command is here through Paul.

And Lord, we long to grow. We long to mature. We long to hear and understand that our mission is holiness. And so we ask for help. And we ask for help in Jesus' name.

Amen.