

Faith: Shipwrecked or Fighting

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray again to God together before we take some time to look at His words. Let's pray. Our great and our loving God, we thank You that You're a Father to us, that You're a God who is living, that You're a God who's true, that You've called us into relationship with Yourself through the death of Your Son and by the work of Your Holy Spirit.

Before we praise You and we worship You, and we're glad tonight for a chance to be together in Your presence, for a chance to find the respite and the peace that Your grace brings into our lives.

And Lord, it's our prayer tonight that as we look at Your word together, that we would have a fresh taste of Your peace, and also that we would have a foretaste of the glory that awaits in heaven.

And we look for You to challenge us, and every time we read Your word openly and we let it speak, it challenges us because of Your holiness, because of what You want from us in our lives, and because of what You have done for us in Jesus Christ to pay for our inability to live in a genuine and in a holy way.

So Lord, we praise You for Your gospel, and we look for Your gospel to reshape us tonight as we look into Your word, and we pray that Your word would bring hope, where in our lives we find hopeless situations.

[1 : 3 6] We pray that Your word would give us wisdom when we feel ourselves so lacking in direction, not knowing what to do. We pray that Your word would bring encouragement for those of us who are discouraged about situations in our own lives.

And we also pray that Your word would direct us to give you thanks when in our own lives we can look and we can see Your goodness, when we can look and see good things happening.

We pray that Your word would redirect us tonight to You as the God who is the giver of every good and perfect gift. So Lord, we pray for Your word to change us, and we also pray for Your word to have great effect in our city, Edinburgh.

We love the city that You've placed us in, and we long for its good, for its redemption. We long to see Edinburgh made a better place by Your gospel spreading and changing lives.

So we pray tonight that as we look into the Bible together that You would equip us to make a difference for Your glory and for Your kingdom in our city.

[2 : 4 8] Lord, we pray then for You to speak. We pray for You through Your Spirit to profoundly challenge us and for You to redraw us afresh to Yourself.

Lord, help us where we struggle to understand Your word. Help us where we simply don't want to put it into practice or to understand it. Lord, please be with us. Don't leave us on our own.

We thank You that You've promised us that Your word never returns to You void, but that it always accomplishes that which You desire. So Lord, we pray that Your desire tonight will be to accomplish great things in our lives through Your word.

We pray that You would want to lead us to glorify You and to find a profound joy in that glory tonight. So Lord, lead us. We pray. Bless us in Jesus' name. Amen.

If you could please keep your Bible open and first Timothy chapter 1, the chapter that we're looking at. Tonight we're looking at verses 18 down to 20. Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you so that by following them you may fight the good fights holding on to faith and a good conscience.

[4 : 15] Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, who may have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

This month we're doing a series of sermons looking at faith. In our society there are really two extremes regarding faith.

I hinted at this a bit this morning and I want to unpack it a little bit tonight as we look at these verses. On one hand you have Richard Dawkins. You have someone typical like that saying that faith is basically the worst thing in the world.

It has no good effects and it's something that we should get rid of. So that's one extreme, one approach to faith in our culture. On the other hand you have someone like George Michael, the singer, who released an album, his debut album called Faith, purchased by over 20 million people. So this is a big, big thing.

The title track called Faith, the chorus, I've got to have faith. He sings about faith as an empty, as a vacuous concept that has no reference to God whatsoever.

[5 : 37] In fact, when he's singing about faith, it's in a context where he's not sure where he stands in relation to a woman and the thing that helps him through fractured relationships is this empty word faith.

I've got to have it. What though is faith? What does the Bible mean when it uses that word? How do we use Scripture to understand the Christian faith in a world where we've got dockings on one hand telling us to get rid of it and where we've got George Michael on the other hand telling us that it's empty and meaningless, but it has some kind of role in our lives?

Well, in this series we're trying to work that out and we're looking at faith from various different angles. And tonight we're looking at these verses in 1 Timothy 1 and we're looking more specifically at what we could call faith in action, the sense in which what we believe turns into what we do.

There's an undeniable connection between the things that we fundamentally believe and the basic patterns in our lives. I would go as far as to say this, that most of us act out our basic presuppositions, our basic beliefs, our basic faith, far more consistently than we ever realize.

If, for example, you basically assume Jesus is coming back any minute now and the earth is all going to get burned up anyway and you've got no duty to care for the planet, that turns into a life where you drive an enormous gas guzzler of a vehicle, where you have that and it's far bigger than you actually need and where you laugh at people who recycle for how much they waste time.

[7 : 24] You do nothing to fight global warming. You know, your life looks like what you believe. We act out what we believe. And that's not my theory.

It's what the Bible teaches. The Bible posits this connection between what we believe and what we do, where what we do follows on from what we believe.

The Bible always does that. It relates belief to action. That's what these verses are about, how authentic faith produces authentic love.

And we can see that here in how the chapter connects faith and love. In verse 5, love which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience, it comes from a sincere faith.

And you can see it also in verse 14 here. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

[8 : 21] Where faith is, love follows. Paul expresses it. Paul, the guy who wrote this, expresses it in one of his other books in Galatians. 5, 6 he says, faith expresses itself in love.

Faith expresses itself in love. If you've read Paul's other letters in the Bible, in the New Testament, think of how often he writes to Christians and says, we're so happy to hear of how you're getting on in your faith and love.

Think of in one of his books in Ephesians, Ephesians 6, the armor of God, putting on faith and love as the breastplate. But with that undeniable connection between belief and action, between what we think and what we do, between our faith and our love, between faith and works, there's a big question, how do we relate these two things?

Is it that we're accepted by God because we have a combination of faith and love together? If not, if we're saved by faith alone, where do our actions fit in? Do we really need love if the thing that we're saved by is faith?

There was a guy called Martin Luther, Christian thinker, Christian writer, a while ago now in Germany, and he summed up really well what the Bible teaches on this.

[9 : 42] He said that we're saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves never comes alone. So there we're saved by our faith, by nothing else.

Saving faith always is accompanied by, is followed up by love, is followed up by good works. And this is what we preach regularly here in St. C's, that if we're Christians, we have been saved by grace alone, and because God has accepted us unconditionally, we're now new people filled with gratitude towards God, and in that spirit of gratitude, not in a spirit of slavery or fear, we want to do good things with our lives, simply to say thank you to God for what he's done for us.

So while we preach a gospel of salvation by faith alone, we don't preach that faith is the end of it. Now you believe you can just carry on doing whatever you used to do, whatever you used to want to do, as long as you believe in Jesus, that's it, full stop.

Not at all. We preach that because you believe in Jesus, and because you've been saved by faith alone, you now have a new motivation to live in a different way, because you now have faith move on to love.

And we're looking at that tonight in this chapter, in these verses. We're looking at how to flourish in your faith, how to turn faith into love, how your faith can express itself in love.

[11 : 21] And what we're looking at is this, that whether we flourish in the faith depends, depends on two things. It depends on whether, A, we believe the gospel in the first place, and B, whether we bring our lives in line with the gospel.

And tonight, we're looking at this in two sections. We're looking at it first of all in Paul's command to Timothy about fighting the goodfights, flourishing faith. And then we're looking at it secondly in Paul's example of people who didn't do that, shipwrecked faith.

So at the beginning we're looking at Paul's command to Timothy to fight the goodfights. The context here is important. Paul's writing this letter to a young man called Timothy. Timothy is a full-time Christian worker in the church in a place called Ephesus.

And Paul gives him this instruction to keep with the prophecies once made about him, so that he may fight the goodfights. What does that mean? What is that?

Is Paul telling him to be aggressive? Is it literal fighting? In our context where we have all these concepts in the news, in politics like Jihad and holy war are such big issues, what does the Bible mean when it speaks about fighting the goodfights?

[12 : 36] Well, it means two things. Paul tells him firstly to hold on to faith. It's the first part of fighting the good fight, and secondly, to hold on to a good conscience.

So we begin there, hold on to faith. We've been critiquing our pop culture around us for how empty it talks about faith.

It means whatever you want it to mean, it's inherently vague. But well, as the Bibles account different, when Paul says hold on to faith, does he have anything better to offer? Is this something specific?

When Paul writes, hold on to faith, how can we know exactly what he means by it? Paul here, he's speaking about something specific when he writes about faith.

Towards the end of this verse, when he writes about guys who have lost the faith, he writes literally concerning the faith they have been shipwrecked.

[13 : 38] So it's not an ambiguous faith that means whatever you want. It's specific, definite article, the faith. It's the faith that he's speaking about, and then towards the end of the book again, he repeats this phrase to Timothy.

It's in chapter 6, fight the good fight of the faith. So it's not, this means whatever we want it to mean faith. It's not a George Michael definition of faith.

It's a biblical definition. It's specific. It's the faith. And how Paul defines it here in chapter 1 is, faith is that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.

That is the faith that Paul tells him to hold on to, to not let go of. It's the gospel itself. We have a specific faith, specific definition of it.

How do we use that in a world where we have dockens telling us faith is bad, get rid of it, and where pop culture tells us, well, it's okay, but it doesn't mean anything.

[14 : 39] What Paul tells us here that keeping the faith is a fight. He's telling us, anticipate this, that there'll be people who'll be in your face telling you, get rid of it. You don't need it. It's bad. Ditch it.

It's going to be a fight to keep hold of this. It doesn't come easily to flourish in the faith. So that, that handles one side of it, the people telling us to lose it.

But then on the other side, people telling us, well, it's okay to have it, but you can't really say it means anything specific. Make it mean what you want it to mean. Paul's telling us, well, it's not our faith. It's not even just faith. It's the faith that we hold on to.

What we have is something specific, and we've got to have it. But it's something specific rather than something empty. So that's the first part of holding, of fighting the good fight, and hold on to the faith as a specific thing.

Then Paul tells him to hold on to a good conscience. What does that mean? What's he talking about? Well, remember what we've been talking about at the beginning.

[15 : 46] That the Bible posits this connection between what we believe. Okay, so that's the faith. What we believe about Jesus. Did he or did he not come into the world to save sinners?

That's the faith that we hold on to, and the connection between that and what we do, the good conscience, which we also must hold on to. What is the connection between those things?

The classic example that we bring up a lot in instantcies because it's so important in getting this idea is from Galatians. From another one of Paul's books, it's in Galatians 2 verses 11-14.

And in this example, the apostle Peter is in a place called Antioch, and he's in a church that's made up of people that used to be Jews and people that were Greeks who've become Christians, all of them.

And there are some Jews in the church who are legalistic and who are racist and who think that they're much better than the Greek Christians, and so much so that they won't even eat with them because they think they're so superior to these Greeks.

[16 : 55] And Peter, who's an apostle, is afraid of these legalistic racists, and he gives in, and he starts refusing to eat with these Greek Christians.

And in Galatians 2, Paul opposes Peter to his face. And to quote Paul, because he was clearly in the wrong, he was not acting in line with the truth of the gospel.

End quote. In this example, Peter might well be holding on to the faith. He'll talk about, well, we believe the gospel, we believe Jesus died for sinners, but he's certainly not holding on to good conscience because he's refusing to use Paul's words from Galatians to let faith express itself in love.

He's refusing to live out what he claims to believe about Jesus and the gospel, and that's why Paul opposes Peter to his face, because we have to hold on to both things.

On to the faith, what we believe about Jesus, and then holding on to love, what we believe about Jesus works itself out in how we live.

[18 : 09] Paul is telling Timothy here that fighting the good fight means just that. It means believing the gospel, and it means living in line with its truth.

It means holding on to the faith and living in its light. These things must be contained together. You can't have one without the other.

We need to have both. For example, later on in this book, Paul is telling Timothy what church elders should be like. This is in chapter 3, verse 9, and he says, they must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith.

So the elders have to hold on to the gospel. They have to keep hold of the deep truths of the faith. Then he says, with a clear conscience, they have to let what they're holding on to you in terms of the truths of the faith work themselves out, become evident, shape the lives of these men.

How we apply this really comes across in what follows next, in Paul's example of shipwrecked faith, in the examples of Hymenaeus and Alexander.

[19 : 22] Who are these guys? One of them has a really random name, a Greek name. He's obviously not from Scotland. Alexander sounds a bit more normal. So who Hymenaeus was from the Bible?

He was a high-profile church figure. We know about him from 2 Timothy. 2 Timothy 2. Paul writes this, their teaching will spread like gangrene.

People, they're teaching in the church, and it's disease that's spreading around, causing spiritual death. 2 Timothy 2, 17. Their teaching will spread like gangrene.

Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.

So this guy, Hymenaeus, is a public figure within the church. He's a leader, he's a theologian, he's a preacher, and he has been teaching people that Jesus has already come and gone, and those still alive on earth have missed the boat.

[20 : 31] He left, he was here, he's gone, and in doing this he's destroying the faith of some people. He's destroying their faith, because if Jesus has already come and gone, and we're just left here, what's the point in all this effort to live a different life?

Why not just do what you want? It doesn't make a difference if you act all holy. Jesus has gone already, there's no point. Give up. Why strive for holiness if it's for nothing, if Jesus has left us to our own devices?

That's the kind of stuff that he's telling people. So you have one man here, public figure, leader, preacher. The other guy, Alexander, as far as we know, is not a public figure, not a preacher, not a high-profile theologian, probably a really ordinary guy.

He might be Alexander the metal worker, who Paul also writes about in 2 Timothy, we don't know for sure. Paul never highlights him and says, this guy is a preacher, don't listen to him.

Probably a really ordinary chap, he's got a common name. We have no evidence then that he was a high-profile figure, like Hymenaeus, probably just a normal church member who got in tow with this dodgy preacher, and he too shipwrecked his faith.

[21 : 56] Now, the fact that these two guys are mentioned here, like this should draw us all in and make us see the seriousness of this for every single one of us.

Maybe we begin with Hymenaeus then and say, well, here's this public figure, this guy with a blog, this guy who sends out his sermons to all of us to listen to, this guy who writes things to affect the way we think.

This guy who's a minister, this guy who's on reporting Scotland with his views. And we think, well, for some of us, yeah, we were public people in the church.

Some of you are training to be ministers, some of you are, some of you are preachers. Some of you are studying theology with a view to having opinions that will be leading opinions.

Some of you are elders, some of you are future elders. And for every current or future leader here in this building, we have a potential Hymenaeus.

[23 : 02] All of us who are in leadership positions, or who one day will be, need to look at this and learn from it so that our faith does not get shipwrecked like his did.

But then you think, well, those public people in the church, and the minority, I'm not like that. I don't aspire to be a theologian or a preacher. I don't aspire to ever get up the front and speak.

I don't aspire to write things. I'm not a public person in the church. I'm a background person. And you think, I'll be alright.

In all likelihoods, Alexander was in exactly the same boats. A background person in the church. For those of us who don't have a public role and never want to, we're not exempt either, because Alexander started off like that probably.

So these are the people. These are our examples. Hymenaeus and Alexander. What did they reject? They rejected good conscience. The translation that we use, the NIV, normally a really excellent translation, very trustworthy, which is why we use it.

[24 : 17] Here it doesn't quite give us the clearest picture. It writes, some have rejected these. These is a plural word, which implies that Hymenaeus and Alexander rejected outright at the same time the faith.

So they were saying Christianity is not true, and they rejected good conscience. And we can live whatever way we want. The NIV, as we were saying, is a really good translation, but it doesn't quite catch it here, because Paul wrote this originally, this, rather than these.

It's a singular word, and it refers specifically to good conscience. And every other English translation that I looked up, and I looked up a lot, translates it as this rather than these, apart from the NIV.

So if you're following this in the King James or in the ESV, you'll be looking at this applied specifically to good conscience. It's not the case that Alexander and Hymenaeus abandoned Christianity at once as a complete package, throwing out the gospel and throwing out a Christian lifestyle at the same time.

That's not what happened. What happened was, first, they found areas in their lives that they were unwilling to apply the gospel to.

[25 : 36] So they've got this gospel message, and they're saying it's true, and then they're looking at, well, this has big consequences for all these areas of my life. And they find parts where it hits a raw nerve, where they're not willing to apply the gospel.

We don't know what it was. It could have been many different things. But they found some sins that they did not want redeemed from. They found some areas that they wanted to keep separate from redemption and from sanctification.

They found some things that they wanted to keep under their own lurchap, under their authority. So they rejected the application of the gospel to something in their lives.

And in doing so, the thing that they let go of first was good conscience. They intentionally began walking out of line with the gospel that they claimed to believe at the beginning.

So they initially were saying that they were still in the faith, even though their lifestyles were clearly out of line with Christianity. So for a while, they were an inconsistent mix of gospel message, but non-gospel living.

[26 : 50] Then because this mixture is inconsistent, because it's untenable and it doesn't work, something had to give. And the thing that gave was the faith.

They weren't willing to redefine their lives, so they redefined what they believed about Christianity. And they twisted it so that it would fit in with how they wanted to live.

And as a result of the end of that, that you get Hymenaeus, the heretical theologian, the guy who's teaching weird stuff about Jesus as an excuse for living however you want to live.

As a preacher, his theology doesn't go way off at the beginning, and then his lifestyle gives way. It's at the beginning he's unwilling to submit parts of his life to the gospel.

And as a result of the end, his theology gives way. And it's sad, but this happens. It's a real danger. It's a tragic danger.

[27 : 55] But there are many people like this who high-profile people, non-high-profile people, who present a version of Christianity that in terms of theology and lifestyle bears no resemblance to an honest reading of the Bible, and yet these people started off as evangelicals.

What gets shipwrecked here? Well, Paul tells us that it's their faith. The end result of letting go of good conscience, of saying, this is what the gospel says my life has to be, but I don't want that.

The end result of that is that your faith gets absolutely shipwrecked. If you take the gospel and your lifestyle and you want them to come together, one of them has to shape the other.

They can't both just have a kind of neutral position, an uneasy truce. One of them has to be dominant, and one of them has to affect the content of the other one.

Either we redefine our lives in accordance with the faith, or we redefine the faith in accordance with our lives. Haimeneus and Alexander were unwilling to adapt their lives to fit in with Christianity.

[29 : 17] So instead they adapted Christianity and turned it into this weird, heretical, non-truth to justify the way that they wanted to live.

If we approach the Christian faith and don't make it our agenda, if we approach it with some other agenda, some other huge cause that everything else in our lives has to be brought in line with, whether it's a particular ideology, a philosophy, whether it's a lifestyle issue, whether it's a particular sin in our lives that we won't condemn and move on from, and we make that thing our absolute.

And how we want to live, we will end up rearranging and chopping and changing our way to the Christian faith to the point that what we're left with is a twisted version of what it should be, where the parts of the Bible that challenge our agenda, well, that's old fashioned, that's regressive, that's culturally conditioned, doesn't apply to me.

If we do that, the consequence is dead faith. The consequence is shipwrecked faith. Either our lives are transformed by our faith, or our faith is transformed by our lives.

Those are the only two options. And the consequences are stark. When Paul speaks about Haimeneas and Alexander, he speaks about them having been handed over to Satan. The language there is all about them being excommunicated from the church.

[30 : 54] What they're teaching is so far removed from God that we'll leave them to who they, in effect, are saying they belong to. And he does that to teach them not to blaspheme, because what they're claiming is Christianity.

What they're claiming is the faith is so twisted that to call it Christian is blasphemy. What this teaches us is that we cannot believe the Gospel from a distance.

Faith either produces and expresses itself in love, or faith dies. It gets shipwrecked. The Gospel is something that does not tolerate minority status in our lives.

It's not happy to live there like that, being twisted and bossed around by whatever else in our lives wants to be dominant. And these are only two options when it comes to faith.

Fighting faith or shipwrecked faith, those are the two consequences. Paul doesn't say to Timothy, if you want you can be something lukewarm in the middle. You can be someone that sort of goes along with it, that sort of has a limp grasp of the faith and of mediocre conscience.

[32 : 13] Paul says, hold on to these things in order to fight the good fights. And if you're not willing to hold on, if you're not willing to fight, the consequence is a shipwreck.

How does the Bible help us then in a world where we're told on one hand to abandon the faith, because it's an evil concept, an outdated concept?

The Bible tells us and gives us every reason to go on fighting the good fights. Go on holding on to faith. How does the Bible help us on the other hand in a world where we're told faith is meaningless and subjective?

The Bible tells us that it's not. The Bible tells us that it is the faith, that it's about how Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners like us.

And I really hope that in looking at these verses together, that we are people who fight the good fights. There were people who hold on to the true faith. There were people who hold on to good conscience.

[33 : 21] And because of that we stand out as so counter-cultural in the face of Richard Dawkins, in the face of George Michael, that the world around us will know that our faith is different and that it's the best thing that we could want in our lives.

Amen. Let's pray together. Our Father God, we thank You that You've given Your Son to come into the world to save sinners like us.

We thank You that that is the faith that has been handed down to us. Lord, we pray that You would help us to believe. We pray that You would help us to fight the good fight that in our lives, in a world that either derides faith and ignores it, or in a world that renders it empty, that You would help us to hold on vigorously to the faith, to hold on with strength to good conscience, to shape our lives in line with the Gospel.

We need Your help desperately to do that, because we cannot do it on our own strength. And Lord, we pray that You would help us to be people whose faith flourishes rather than people who are unwilling to submit our lives to Your holiness and to Your transforming grace.

And as a result, who twist the true faith. Lord, help us not to be like Haim and Naus. We pray this especially for the leaders in our congregation, for public people whose job it is to explain Christianity.

[34 : 57] And we pray that also for our students preparing for ministry in the future, for those studying theology, that You would help them to honour You with their minds and with their lives.

And Lord, we also pray for the background people, which many of us can relate to, with the challenge to fight the good fight rather than fade away and be shipwrecked.

Lord, help us in all of these things to glorify You in our faith. Amen.