

## 1 Timothy 6:11-12

We are continuing this morning in our study of Paul's first letter to Timothy, looking at chapter 6, and picking up at verse 11 of that chapter. In previous studies we have seen how throughout this letter Paul's main goal has been to promote the good order and functioning of the Ephesian church. And, while some of Paul's other letters were written directly to churches *as a whole* - for example the letter to the Corinthians, or the Colossians, or the Philippians - in *this* letter Paul directs his comments to a person - Timothy - who is the *pastor* of the Ephesian congregation. Now, because Paul knows Timothy so well - since he disciplined him - he knows that the things he has given to Timothy will eventually be passed on to his congregation. As 2 Tim2:2ff shows us, this was Paul's expectation with anyone he poured his life into - that the things he gave them, they would pass on to others.

And so, because of this dynamic, the letter to Timothy at times feels very personal and yet at other times feels more public. Paul will move back and forth between general discussions of various matters to directly addressing Timothy on the issues at hand. In the verses before us this morning, we see this sort of movement once again as Paul shifts from talking about the false teachers and their teaching to addressing Timothy more directly as the one person that he knows is a true and faithful teacher of the Gospel.

More specifically, Paul has just been talking about the way that at least some of the false teachers have been promoting a version of "Christianity" that was deeply corrupt, and which taught that godliness was a means to financial gain - a way to get rich. These teachers were themselves lovers of money and were leading many other people down that same path of ruin and destruction.

It is against that sort of background, that we need to hear Paul's words, beginning in verse 11, "But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession."

(Pray)

In responding, once again, to the unhelpful things being promoted amongst the Ephesians, Paul begins his final exhortation or charge to Timothy with a series of four imperatives which form a complete contrast to all that the false teachers were doing and saying.

Paul's four imperatives are: 1) flee, 2) pursue, 3) fight and 4) Take hold. Let's take a few minutes to look at each of these in turn. First of all, Paul says that there is *something he wants Timothy to flee*..... (read vs 11a)

Paul tells Timothy to "flee *from all this*". Now, what does Paul mean by "all this"? Well, what has he just been talking about? He's been talking about people who are

driven by a desire to be rich. He's been talking about people being consumed with a love for money and so plunging themselves into ruin and destruction. Those are the things that he wants Timothy to flee.

Rather than pursuing riches and *nurturing* a love of money, Paul wants Timothy to go the other direction - to put some distance between himself and whatever it was that might prove to be a danger or a temptation to him in this particular area. Paul doesn't just tell Timothy to be careful or watch himself. He doesn't just tell him to take some precautions. He tells him to FLEE. He tells him to take radical, positive, definite, evasive action. Why? Because the temptation is a great one, because the danger is very real. And if you don't believe that, just flip through the cable TV channels one night.

I remember one of my professors at seminary, when asked what one of his top pieces of advice for young men going into their first pastorate was, he responded by saying, "Do not envy the rich - especially the rich in your congregation. Do not envy the rich" - Why did he say that? He said that for the same reason that Paul told Timothy to flee the desire to be rich.

And it is real danger isn't it? And not just for pastors of 1<sup>st</sup> century churches, but for Christians in 21<sup>st</sup> century churches as well. We need to flee - to run away - from the desire to be rich, from the love of money. We need to identify those things which are a temptation for us and which nurture our desires in this area. Ask yourself, "What are the things that consistently produce dis-satisfaction and discontent in my heart? What are the situations that consistently cause me to discount, and de-value, and even despise the blessings I have already received at God's hand? Whatever those things are, whatever those situations entail - you need to flee. You need to put some distance between yourself and those things. Because if the result of your hanging on to them is that they nurture your desire for riches, and tempt your heart with the love of money - then you are flirting with disaster and setting yourself on the path of ruin and destruction.

The second of Paul's four imperatives is a companion to the first. Not only does he have something for Timothy to *flee*, he also has something for him to *pursue*. ".....*pursue* righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness..."

In place of chasing after riches, Paul wants Timothy to pursue other things - more noble things. In the same way that Paul in other places tells God's people to "put off the old self" and "put on the new" - so here we see the same sort of thing taking place. Paul instructs Timothy *negatively* - by telling him what to run away from - and then joins that to a more *positive* instruction - telling him what to pursue.

And, if I could just say by way of a side note - this sort of pattern of contrasts is something that we see not only in Paul, but throughout the New Testament Scriptures. In the Gospel of John we are told that "God is LIGHT and in Him is no DARKNESS at all". The fruit of the sinful nature in Galatians 5:19ff is contrasted with the fruit of the Spirit in vs 22ff. As we have already seen, when Paul talks about "putting off" certain

behaviors, he joins that to “putting on” others. Over and over again in the Bible you see these sorts of contrasts which are one reason why the Bible’s teaching is so compelling and clear.

*Those of you who teach* - parents, educators - take note. If you want to make sure that what you are saying *gets through* to people, if you want to teach in a way that is clear and compelling, then dealing with contrasts is absolutely essential - saying what a thing is and also what it isn’t, showing what a thing means, and what it doesn’t mean, pointing out how a thing applies - and how it doesn’t - in all those ways and more using contrasts can make a big difference.

And, again, this is the very sort of thing that happens all over the Bible and is happening right here in Paul’s words to Timothy. He doesn’t just want him to stop pursuing riches. As if the Christian life is all about negation. No he wants him to replace *that* cheap and tawdry pursuit with one that is far superior and infinitely more satisfying - the pursuit of righteousness, godliness, etc.

Now, in thinking about the particular things mentioned on Paul’s list, it is important to say, at the outset, that whenever you see a list in the Bible - the first thing you must say to yourself is, “This is not an exhaustive list” - (Have them say that with me). So, now that you know this is not an exhaustive list but a representative list - a selective list - then you have to think about what is on the list and why it’s there. Why has Paul chosen to emphasize these *particular* things as being necessary for Timothy to pursue? And the answer is that they are related to this whole problem of pursuing wealth. The things listed here, if pursued, would provide a strong antidote to the love of money.

For example, Paul tells Timothy to pursue righteousness and godliness because the false teachers were promoting a certain *version* of godliness - but it was one which was being advertised as a means to gain. It was one which encouraged discontentment among its adherents. In short, it was an alleged “godliness” that was nothing of the sort - one that led to unrighteousness and evil desires and foolish temptations. So, having identified that sort of so-called godliness as a fraud, Paul wants Timothy to pursue the real thing.

Next in the list you see faith and love. If we look back, again, to the sort of “godliness” that was being promoted by the false teachers, then we see that it was of a kind that resulted in people *wandering away from the faith* (in both doctrine and commitment) Further, it was something that encouraged people to love money and, as a result, to put things before people. That is, to love things more than people. And so, in the face of that sort of thing, Paul again emphasizes that they should pursue faith - not wander away from it - and that they should pursue love - meaning real love - not love of money.

At the end of the list you see endurance and gentleness. Once again, the impact of the false teachers' emphasis on riches was very likely to create a people who were so driven by their love of money that they could easily be impatient with others who got in the way of their goals. Likewise with their circumstances - any circumstance that stood between them and their pursuit would have surely been met with a great deal of irritation and impatience. And so, over against that sort of thing, Paul urges Timothy to pursue the very qualities that were diametrically opposed to all that - endurance and gentleness.

Well, you say, that's all fine and good, but how does that happen? What did it mean for Timothy to pursue those things mentioned? Further, what would it mean for you and me to do the same? Well, as the better commentators have noted, Paul doesn't actually flesh that out right here in any real concrete terms. There is just the bald command to pursue certain things.

However, if you look at what Paul says in other places you come across passages like Phil 4:9, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." There are a number of other verses just like that which are communicating the same idea - that Paul expected people to imitate him. He expected them to learn some important lessons about living out their Christian life just by watching him. Further, from the way he writes in the Pastoral Epistles, it seems that he regarded this as something which was not unique to him as an apostle. He saw it as a transferable practice.

And so, in the absence of any specific instruction here, but in light of Paul's general practice elsewhere, I would say that at the very least, one way that Paul would have expected Timothy to know how to apply these things was simply by recalling Paul's manner of life amongst them - reflecting on his words and actions and imitating those things. To put it another way, it was one member of the Body of Christ learning from another member of the Body what it looked like to pursue godliness and righteousness and faith and love and endurance and gentleness.

And that same dynamic of imitation, and that same opportunity of learning what these things mean and how they can be applied through the Body of Christ - that same dynamic is available to God's people in every age. If the command is to "pursue godliness" - look around you. Who are the godly people that have been placed into your life by no accident? How are *they* putting these things into practice? Do you struggle with gentleness? Look at all the gentle people that God has placed in your path, and in your church family. Listen to how they say things. Watch the way they do things - or refrain from doing them. Do you struggle with love? Look around you. Locate the people to whom God has obviously given a very big and generous heart - and who love in word and deed. And learn from them. God has given you tremendous resources for the pursuit of godliness - right here in this room.

So, that is one response that we could make. And, by itself, it is a helpful thing, but it is not sufficient. There's more that needs to be addressed here. And we see that reality by looking at Paul's third imperative. After talking to Timothy about *fleeing some*

*things* and then *pursuing others*, he says to him, “Fight the good fight of the faith”.

Now, this is a fascinating phrase that Paul uses. First of all, notice that Paul uses the language of “fighting” here to talk about the sort of lifestyle to which Timothy is to give himself. He tells him to *fight* because it IS a fight - and will be one for the remainder of his days. Paul uses this sort of contending, military language - the language of struggle - all over the place to describe the nature of the Christian’s life. Because it IS a fight and it FEELS like a fight. Right? Romans 7 describes the fight in terms of an internal conflict. Ephesians 6 describes the spiritual dimensions of our fight - that we struggle with spiritual forces - not just with flesh and blood. But it IS a fight, and Paul tells Timothy that is a *good* fight - in other words, it is a fight that must be had and is worth engaging in.

And Timothy is, therefore, to apply himself to it. He is not to sit back and wait for the battle to come to him. He is to engage in the battle, proactively, by fleeing some things and pursuing others.

Now, as most scholars have pointed out, it is probably significant that Paul tells Timothy to fight the good fight of THE faith. In other words, Paul doesn’t say, “Fight the good fight of faith”, but rather, “fight the good fight of THE faith”. Do you see what I’m saying? And the reason that is important is because often when Paul talks about “the faith”, and uses that kind of language, he is referring to the particular doctrines that are part and parcel of the Gospel which he preached.

So, when he tells Timothy in other places to guard “the faith” - he is saying that he wants him to hold on to and carefully transmit the truths that Paul had taught him. Likewise, when Paul talks here about fighting the good fight of “the faith” it is very likely that there is in that command a concern that Timothy would guard and protect the sound doctrine he has received. As verse 10 states, some had wandered away from those truths - but Timothy is not to do anything of the sort. He is to hang on to them and even *fight* for them. And so, there is in these words a concern that Timothy would fight for and uphold and preserve the truths that have been handed on to him by Paul.

But there’s more to it than that. Because fighting the good fight of the faith is about more than just being committed to preserving doctrinal purity. It’s about engaging in the Christian struggle - which includes commitment to true doctrine - but which also includes *living* that doctrine - not just being able to quote it. It means that you fight in the war that faith started and you fight it with the weapons that God has put at our disposal - spiritual weaponry and protection which Paul describes so well in places like Ephesians 6. And you not only fight with the weapons God has given us - but you fight in a way which God intends us to fight. And that way is *by faith*. Believing what God has said, trusting in what God has said, placing our confidence in what he has promised - those sorts of realities are at the heart of this thing that is “the good fight of the faith”.

Because, while you may, from time to time, find yourself having to fight to protect and preserve the correct biblical doctrine and so contend for the faith in that way, the

reality is that the biggest and most sustained fight in which you will find yourself is the one that happens in here (your heart) every single day as your struggle to believe that what God has said is really true, that He has accomplished what He says He has accomplished, that He will surely do what He has said He will do, that what has been promised to you as his heir and child, is truly and securely yours in Christ.

That has been, and will continue to be, your most sustained battle as a Christian. But it is a battle we must engage in. It is a *good fight* that is borne of reflection on the true doctrine which we have received. And, in the end, it is the only real way to see progress in the things that Paul is describing here.

So, how does “fighting the good fight of the faith” relate to the “fleeing” and “pursuing” of verse 11. Well, to help you understand that connection, let me first quote from two writers - one living, and the other long gone, but still preaching from the grave. Firstly, hear some words by John Piper,

*...Sin is what you do when your heart is not satisfied with God. No one sins out of duty. We sin because it holds out some promise of happiness. That promise enslaves us [and will continue to enslave us] until we believe that God is more to be desired than life itself. Which means that the power of sin's promise is broken by the power of God's. All that God promises to be for us in Jesus stands over against what sin promises to be for us without him.*

And then, here these words from Thomas Chalmers,

*There are two ways in which a practical moralist may attempt to displace from the human heart its love of the world - either by a demonstration of the world's vanity, so that the heart shall be prevailed upon simply to withdraw its regards from an object that is not worthy of it; or, by setting forth another object, even God, as more worthy of its attachment, so that the heart shall be prevailed upon not to resign an old affection, which shall have nothing to succeed it, but to exchange an old affection for a new one. My purpose is to show that from the constitution of our nature, the former method is altogether incompetent and ineffectual, and that the latter method will alone suffice for the rescue and recovery of the heart from the wrong affection that domineers over it.*

In other words, you have to fight fire with fire - a harmful affection will only be destroyed, ultimately, by a greater and more noble one. So, when Paul tells Timothy to flee the love of money and the pursuit of riches and to pursue other more noble realities instead, he follows that up with this call to “fight the good fight of the faith” - Why? Because he knows that unless that pursuit of godliness is one that is born of faith - unless it is the pursuit of one who is actively abandoning an old affection in pursuit of a greater hope and promise - then that pursuit will be short-lived. Unless Timothy, by faith, is learning to believe that the future promised by God is greater than any future promised by sin, then he will soon run out of gas, and abandon the pursuit.

Which is, then, where the fourth imperative picks up. “Take hold”, says Paul,

“Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” Paul is referring here to Timothy’s conversion, to the time when he first understood and believed the Gospel. And Paul says to Timothy here, “Take hold of this”.

Now, you may wonder why Paul instructs Timothy to “take hold” of something which he already possesses. Right? I mean, the truth is, when Timothy became a believer way back when, he, at that very moment, took possession of eternal life through Christ Jesus - a life that started at that point and which continues, even now, into all eternity. So, again, why does Paul tell him to take hold of that which he already possesses?

Well, as one commentator puts it, “It is possible to possess something without embracing and enjoying it”. You can be holding on to a thing, but not very tightly. You can believe in something, but not very firmly. And the verb that Paul uses to say “take hold” here is one that often suggests a very *forceful taking hold* of something, an almost violent grasping of something. So Paul is saying “really, REALLY, take hold of the truth of your eternal life in Christ”.

It is the difference, you see, between holding on to something lightly - like holding a pencil, versus holding onto something for dear life - like a tiny handhold on a sheer cliff face. It is the difference between the way you hold a child’s hand as you walk through a park and the way you hold her hand as you stand on a busy street corner, waiting for the light to change, fearful that she might run into traffic. It is the difference between a polite hug and the passionate, legitimate embrace of a husband and wife.

On the heels of his command to “fight the good fight of the faith”, Paul, in the same spirit and tracking along the same lines of thought, adds “Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called” - and by this he means REALLY take hold - he means to FIERCELY take hold of these things. Which is simply, in the end, another way of reinforcing the call to “fight the good fight of the faith”. It is a challenge to continue to believe that what God has said IS true. It is a call to walk by faith and not by sight. To abandon the old pursuits and engage in the pursuit of righteousness and godliness and love and gentleness - not because you have necessarily worked everything out - or because you can even say what lies ahead for you - but simply because, by faith, you are learning to believe that the future promised by God is better and richer and greater than any other future that sin might promise.