

Fight the Good Fight!

Psalm 49:1-20, 1 Timothy 6:1-21 (ESV)

June 11, 2006

“As for you, O man of God...Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. 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.” “Fight the good fight of the faith.” In the middle of these pious exhortations about righteousness and eternal life, we have this militant imperative: “Fight the good fight.” In fact, it is immediately after the Christian encouragement to love and gentleness that we have this militant imperative: “Fight the good fight.” We probably are not accustomed to such language in the church today. Such militancy might suggest militarism and all of its concomitant political incorrectness. What, then, can it possibly mean?

As we work our way through this letter of instruction to a young pastor, we encounter a lot of pastoral advice, a number of rules about church officers, some insights into ancient heresies that were disturbing the church, and not a little encouragement as Timothy goes about building up the church. That is to say, this kind of writing is different from the Psalms, different from the prophets, and very different from the gospels with the parables of Jesus and the accounts of his healing miracles and even of his birth, crucifixion, and resurrection. In fact, in passages like John 3:16 (ESV), “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life,” the gospel is right there on the surface for all the world to see, which is not at all the case in the kind of writing we are reading today. And yet, that does not at all mean that the gospel is absent from this writing. Quite the opposite. This is letter from an apostle of Jesus Christ to an early Christian pastor. The gospel of Jesus Christ is everywhere assumed. So I invite you to think together with me about the foundations, the underlying gospel assumptions, the good news so deeply imbedded in these strong words: “Fight the good fight.”

The first thing this says is that life is worth living. Life is a gift. And life is worth living. It may be hard. It may be a struggle. It may crash down upon us. But life is a remarkable, wonderful gift. And life is worth living. This good news stands not only over and against the cheapness of life during the days of the Roman Empire but also and especially over and against the gross devaluing of life in our own days by those who so blithely assert that life is meaningless and pointless. Secularists say that there is no God, that there is no creator, that there is no purpose or goal to life,

and that life itself is a cosmic accident, a coincidental collision of molecules into complex, self-replicating structures. The conclusion would have to be that life has no meaning and that there is no right or wrong. But I submit to you that they are wrong. And not only are they wrong, but also they are insidious and pernicious, encouraging death and destruction. They are enemies of humanity. The gospel of Jesus Christ stands against such lies.

In one church which I served as pastor, in another state, a man committed suicide. There is no way now that we will ever know in this life what drove him to such despair. But this much I do know: at some level, his suicide represented a failure in my ministry to communicate to him this very basic piece of the gospel, that life is worth living. There is more to the gospel than that, much more, but if you do not hear this piece first, you may not have a chance to hear the rest. And he may not ever have come to church enough to have heard that. So, whatever else you hear today, hear this: life is worth living. "Fight the good fight."

Second, and building upon the first, the fight is worth fighting. This has more of an edge to it. To say only that life is worth living at least runs the risk of passivity. It at least runs the risk of suggesting that life is what happens to you. But life is more than passivity. Life is activity. Life is a struggle. Life is a fight that is worth fighting.

Of course, the question arises as to which fight is worth fighting. There are many which could be engaged. But here we are talking about the Christian life. So when we say, within the context of the Christian life, that the fight is worth fighting, we make particular reference to the Christian faith. And this is the fight that is worth fighting, the fight for which Paul gave his life, the fight which Paul urged Timothy to enter: the fight for the correct articulation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and therefore for the true content of the Christian faith. The false teachers distorted the gospel and therefore destroyed the Christian faith. And for Paul, and for us, this is worth fighting for.

Paul was not tolerant of falsehoods and lies. That would have been stupid and faithless. Paul was not inclusive of that which denied the person and work of Jesus Christ. Neither do we have to include such silliness in the church. Paul was not pleased with a diversity of faith among the one people of God, though he was quite aware that the one true faith would attract a diverse group of people. We do not need to celebrate diversity as such. Diversity is a simple fact. What we do celebrate is the wonderful unity we share in Christ despite our obvious diversity. That is what is remarkable. Neither was Paul a pluralist, though he lived in a pluralist empire that would make even our neo-pagan world seem tame. Paul was committed to the singularity and unity of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The fight is worth fighting. It was then. And it still is now. "Fight the good fight."

Third, not only is life worth living, and not only is the fight worth fighting, but also there is a good fight, and it is this good fight that is worth fighting, for the sake of the good life, the Christian life. John Calvin offers a good insight into the nature of this urging: “Carelessness and self-indulgence spring from the desire of men to serve Christ without trouble, as if it were a pastime, whereas Christ calls his servants to warfare.”¹ Do you see the difference? How many people yet today approach their Christian life as if it were a hobby, one hobby among many, and pretty far down the list at that? How many people yet today treat their churchmanship as if it were just one more extra-curricular activity, and not a very important one at that, just something to do if nothing better comes along? No wonder Paul calls upon Timothy to fight the good fight. Warfare demands your full attention, your complete commitment, your unswerving dedication. If you blink, you lose. This good fight is the cause for which other things should be set aside. With anything less than military attentiveness and combat, we will not make it through the daily struggle for life.

Calvin continues:

To encourage him [Timothy] to fight this fight bravely he [Paul] calls it good, that is blessed, and therefore not in any way to be avoided. For if earthly soldiers do not hesitate to fight when the outcome is uncertain and they are in danger of death, how much more bravely ought we to fight under the guidance and banner of Christ, where we can be certain beforehand of victory, more especially since a reward awaits us, far beyond the rewards usually given by commanders to their men, a glorious immortality and heavenly blessedness. It would be unworthy, if with such a hope before us we should faint or grow weary.²

I think Calvin expresses well the urgency which Paul places before us. “It would be unworthy, if with such a hope before us we should faint or grow weary.” So let us fight the good fight.

¹John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas W. Torrance, vol. 10, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. T. A. Smail (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 10:276.

²Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, 10:276.

We have already begun to touch on this good fight in terms of fighting for the faith and the gospel. But Paul goes on to define it even more precisely when he uses the same word, “good,” to refer not only to the fight of the Christian life but also to the “good confession” that Jesus Christ himself made in his testimony before Pontius Pilate. What was the good confession that Jesus made?

Christ made His confession before Pilate not in many words but in reality, that is by his voluntary submission to death. For although Christ chose to keep silent before Pilate rather than speak in His own defence, since He had come there already devoted to a certain condemnation, yet in His very silence there was a defence of His teaching no less magnificent than if He had pleaded His case with a loud voice. For He ratified it with His own blood and with the sacrifice of His death better than with any words.³

That is to say, Jesus maintained his faith in God. He refused to hate those who persecuted him. He refused to sin. He fulfilled his calling. He gave himself up for you and for me. Jesus made the good confession before Pilate, the confession of his faith in God, the confession of his absolute commitment to God, not with something like the Apostles’ Creed which we use every Sunday but with his actions and with the giving of his life, with the result that he won for us the forgiveness of our sin and the promise of eternal life. How can we do any less than to follow him? “Whenever our hearts waver, let us remember immediately to look to the death of Christ for strength. What cowardice it would be to desert such a leader who goes before us to show us the way.”⁴

Because Jesus made the good confession of his faith in God, so is the good fight which we are to fight defined in terms of the Christian faith. Thus, “Teach and urge these things.” Stand up for the gospel of Jesus Christ and for the Christian faith. And that does not mean making nice. It means speaking the truth and therefore speaking out against those who do not speak the truth. There is still plenty of opportunity for that today.

If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords

³Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, 10:278.

⁴Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, 10:278.

with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

This is not the way to get along with everybody. But this is the way to stand up for Jesus Christ. “Fight the good fight.”

So, the underlying gospel here, the gospel everywhere assumed here, is that life is worth living, the fight is worth fighting, and the good fight has been defined by Jesus Christ. What are the ongoing implications of this gospel? Paul writes, “Fight the good fight of the faith.” What does that mean? Hear the gospel. Believe the gospel. Live the gospel. There are the implications for the Christian life. “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, which he will display at the proper time.” We are called to live our lives in ways that are appropriate to the gospel.

Finally, the book concludes with the highest and most pointed exhortation that the aim of the good fight is to keep the gospel pure and to protect the content of the faith: “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.” This is the treasure of the gospel and of the faith. It is worth protecting.

The time may come in your life and in mine when false teachers invade the church even at the highest levels and try to teach us any number of falsehoods: that Jesus Christ is not divine, that God can be reimagined in any way we please, that the Trinity can be renamed in any way we please, that the Scriptures are not reliable, that we know better today than did the authors of Scripture what is right and what is wrong, that the content of the faith we have received does not matter, that obedience does not matter, and that the Christian life does not matter. If and when that day comes, let us remember what Paul wrote to Timothy: “Fight the good fight of the faith.” Let us take up arms appropriate to defending the Christian faith.

*To the blessed and only Sovereign,
the King of kings and Lord of lords,
who alone has immortality,
who dwells in unapproachable light,
whom no one has ever seen or can see,*

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be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

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