



1 Timothy 1:12-20

Waging the Good Warfare

15th Sunday After Pentecost | All Saints' Day (Observed) — February 12, 2017 (am)

INTRODUCTION

Paul wrote a letter to Timothy more than twenty centuries ago that we could label a pastor's guide to pursuing godliness, guarding the faith, and gaining eternal life for himself and his hearers. And we still draw life-giving instruction from it today! In the earlier half of his opening greeting last Sunday (1-11) we heard Paul urge Timothy to charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine (3) so that the church there in Ephesus might not be distracted or diverted away from a proper lifestyle of gospel love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (5).

There were some in Ephesus who were setting up false standards of spirituality that were leading people away from pursuing of the pure gospel—the stewardship of God that is by faith (4). These false standards were spin-offs from the law, distortions that caused people to wander away into vain discussion and speculations. We don't understand the attraction of myths and genealogies so much today, though there are still many who gain identity and significance and even purpose from knowing their roots—who they're related to in their family line. But these folk in Ephesus just didn't get the fact that the gospel is not a philosophy of life to be debated. It's a gift from God that we receive by faith. It reconciles us to Him and produces in us a lifestyle of love that (flows) from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (5)—which just means love that (flows) from a heart and mind (conscience) that are reconciled to God by sincere faith. The law can't help us live in this love. It can only clarify all the different ways we deviate from it by our sinful nature.

Paul wants Timothy to help the Ephesian church retain this truth. Paul wants him to push back this different doctrine so the church can live in the gospel love he describes here. Now, this week, Paul wants to bolster Timothy's confidence that the gospel is strong enough for him to fulfill this charge (18). Paul introduces two essential weapons for (waging this) good warfare. (It

may sound strange to call salvation and Scripture weapons, but in 2Co.10(4) the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh..., and in Eph.6(17) the sword of the Spirit... is the word of God.)

THANKSGIVING TO GOD FOR HIS AMAZING SALVATION – 12-17

(12) I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service. Paul is thankful to Jesus for strengthening him to be faithful, trustworthy (Guthrie 77), in this apostolic service to which he's been called. Paul is overwhelmed with God's goodness and mercy to him, (13) though formerly (he) was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent, insultingly contemptuous (MWCD11). But I received mercy, Paul writes, because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, (14) and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. I was a scoundrel, lost in sin and running headlong in the opposite direction from God, persecuting those who believed. (13) ... But I received mercy..., (14) and... grace—God's saving grace (super-abounded to) me, granting me the faith and love that are mine in Christ Jesus. Paul is saying that, to him, the most amazing part of the gospel of the glory of the blessed God (11) is that it was actually able to save him, of all people.

Are you so amazed? If we don't share Paul's amazement that the grace of God can actually save us, personally, we're likely going to be rather unmoved by the blackness of our sin, and also quite hard-hearted toward the sin of others. If we don't share Paul's amazement that the grace of God can actually save us, personally, we're likely going to feel that the cost for the church to be the church is just too high. Or we'll grow concerned that we're misfiguring that cost—that it really shouldn't be this hard to turn away from the world and follow Jesus. The bar shouldn't be so high.

We need to say with Paul: (13) ... I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, (14) and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (15) The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. Paul understood this about himself, and knew its actual truth. And, like him, we must recognize the blackness of our own sin. It is wrongheaded to make this a competition, saying, "No, Paul, I am the foremost!" But it's equally wrong-headed to say: "Yes, Paul, you were the foremost. I'm sure glad I'm not as sinful as you!" (16) ... I received mercy, he adds, for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life—as an example to others that God can actually save them, too! (17) To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the

only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. The God who can save sinners is a remarkable God indeed! He's the only God! And He's worthy of all honor and glory forever!

With this reassurance to Timothy of the greatness of God and the power of the gospel to change lives, Paul returns to his charge from back in vv.3-5. And his second weapon for (waging) the good warfare is:

HOLDING TO THE WORD OF GOD IN FAITH AND A GOOD CONSCIENCE – 18-20

(18) This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, (19) holding faith and a good conscience. ... We're not very familiar with prophecies like this made about us. But remember that when Paul wrote to Timothy our New Testament had not yet been collected together as a unit. In fact, only a portion of it had even been written! So direct words from the Lord through His prophets were still one of the primary means of His communicating with and to and about His people. Timothy had heard certain prophesies about himself, perhaps about his gifting or calling, that he needed to receive as the Word of God. And that Word needed to serve him now and strengthen his confidence that he could fulfill the charge Paul had given to him.

So what is Paul saying? He's saying: "Look what the gospel, the direct Word of God has done in my life, Timothy. And look what it's done and yours. Trust it. Act on it. When you see bad ideas seeping back into the church, address them. Wage the good warfare (18). And (hold your) faith with a good conscience as you do it."

Conscience meant much the same thing in the ancient world as it does today: the seat of moral awareness/discernment/judgment. It's the part of our minds and hearts that nudges us (or slaps us!) when we don't do the right thing. Paul referred to it several times in his letters to Timothy (1:5; 3:9; 2Ti.1:3). Here (and v.5), a good conscience suggests that conscience can be re-conditioned. The same is true in 1Co.8⁷ where Paul referred to a weak conscience. The implication there is that conscience can be strengthened. And this strengthening is a by-product of maturing faith. Paul made a similar point in Rom.14 without using the word. Still, a good conscience is not the only sort of conscience he refers to in his Pastoral letters. He speaks of the (consciences) of false teachers being seared (4:2) and corrupted (Tit.1:15). That's the opposite

of a conscience that's cleansed by the glorious gospel (11). So a good conscience is not (just) one (that's guilt-free), but (that's re-oriented) by the Holy Spirit (Kelly 43).

Back to what Paul is telling Timothy; he's saying: "Don't wig out. Don't cave at crunch time. When you meet someone who's teaching different doctrine (3), (hold your) faith with a good conscience, and address it! Correct it! Don't let it take root in the church! Holding faith and a good conscience, established on the Word of God that affirms His gifting and calling and promises His presence and enabling, is sufficient for you to do this work, Timothy." Indeed, it was! And it's been enough for the servants of God ever since, on the very same basis! I'm reminded of the words of Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms: "Since then your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason..., my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant any-thing, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen" (Bainton 144). There it is!

We, like Timothy, are under the direct Word of God in our lives. We've been (charged) by Jesus to make disciples of all nations (Mat.28:18-20). And He's promised to be with us in that charge to the very end of the age. Also, we, like Timothy, are equipped in Christ with a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere, saving faith to stand up against bad ideas in our day as they begin to seep back into the church, and compromise the gospel, and lead many astray into empty discussion, and soften God's people as they seek to live in the power of the gospel and the purity of sound doctrine.

Threats to the gospel and sound doctrine abound in our world. And the church is increasing comfortable with such ideas, often just in order to make every attempt not to set up false barriers to the gospel. But we cannot agree with the sexual ethics of this world, or definitions of marriage that allow for no-fault divorce or same-sex partners or a plurality of partners beyond one man and one woman. We cannot agree with leadership philosophies that treat the church like a business while failing to recognize its truest nature as the people of a sovereign God united into one living body by the regeneration and indwelling work of God's Spirit under the Headship of His Son. No matter how out-of-step such ideas in the church become with competing ideas in this world, the church cannot move toward compromise on them. We must (hold) the Word of God in faith and a good conscience.

And there's much at stake here, isn't there? We see it right here in Paul's words: (19) ... By rejecting this (a good conscience), some have made shipwreck of their faith, (20) among whom

are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. These two were ensnared by some different doctrine and ended up feeling the ultimate expression of discipline from the church. The language here is that of 1Co.5 and excommunication from the New Covenant community of believers. Much at stake.

CONCLUSION

But this is still our charge, too. Wage the good warfare in defense of the gospel and sound doctrine in our day, holding faith and a good conscience. As the people of God, we are equipped to do it. And the aim is not just to be right. (5) The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Let's now celebrate our identity and unity as the people of God by coming to the Lord's Table as one body.