

Fight the good fight. That's Paul's instruction to Timothy in our reading today. We have come to the end of this Epistle. And Paul's closing arguments are worth hearing. The metaphor is athletic rather than military. Paul's terminology points in the direction of a boxing match—you can pick whatever sport you choose. And this is a tremendous metaphor for remaining faithful to Jesus Christ.

False teachers, the world, and even our own sinful nature—not to mention the devil—all draw us away from Jesus Christ. And so remaining in Jesus Christ is a struggle! It requires effort—and determination and discipline. And it's a daily, hourly, minute-by-minute sort of struggle. You have to fight for your faith.

Paul used the exact same language for himself as his life drew to a close in 2 Timothy. Famously, he said, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

And then in 1 Corinthians 9, he says, "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."

That's what we want as believers. To look back on our lives—obviously still knowing that we were sinners—but sinners who stayed true to Christ in faith. We were disciplined like athletes. Dedicated to our task. We endured in Christ to the end. We didn't abandon Him. We didn't quit. We fought the good fight. We finished the race. We kept the faith.

The Anglican J.C. Ryle spends a chapter in his book, *Holiness* on this kind of fight. He wrote,

"The Christian sees his own many sins, his weak heart, a tempting world, a busy devil, and if he looked only at them he might well despair. But he sees also a mighty Saviour, an interceding Saviour, a sympathizing Saviour—His blood, His righteousness, His everlasting priesthood—and he believes that all this is his own. He sees Jesus and casts his whole weight on Him. Seeing Him, he cheerfully fights on, with a full confidence that he will prove more than a conqueror through Him that loved him."

This fight has a look to it. We are going to get into that tonight in Paul's comments. It is about our confession, how we view our resources, and of course, it is about the Gospel. And there is a goal of eternal life in the end zone. In verse 12 Paul says, "Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called."

Of course, Paul isn't suggesting that eternal life is something we can earn. This isn't any kind of works-righteousness. Remember, his instructions are to Timothy—who is already in the faith. He even calls Timothy a man of God in our reading.

Eternal life is a gift of grace—or we are not getting it at all. Notice he says that he was *called* to eternal life. And the call of Christ made all the difference for him—and for us. But he is still expressing the importance of remaining faithful to Jesus Christ.

And here, Paul points to the importance of the confession of our faith. There are lots of places you could be tonight. But your presence here says something to the world about

what matters to you. Going to Church is a confession. Participating is a confession. Singing is a confession.

And we can hear creedal and doxological language right in the middle of our reading. It sounds like something that would fit nicely into our liturgy. Paul encourages Timothy to reflect upon the good confession Christ made—and then the confession that Paul makes about Christ. And then, that becomes his own. It becomes ours too. Listen to what Paul says.

“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—he who is 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. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.”

When Jesus was being questioned by Pontius Pilate, He told him that he was indeed the Messiah—the King of the Jews. He went to the cross for what He had said about Himself—before the Pharisees and High Priests. When the stakes for Jesus were at the absolute highest, He confessed the truth. And Paul and Timothy follow in His steps. They are willing to confess Christ—to be associated with Christ—to make their faith known in the world. This is fighting for the faith.

In the midst of all of this, Paul says, “keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ...” It’s not entirely clear which *commandment* Paul has in mind. The word is singular.

I tend to think it goes back to the beginning of our reading, “Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.” Confession involves commitment—even pursuit. Therefore, it is for Timothy now to prove himself—living his life according to the dictates of righteousness.

We gave some time to this word *godliness* earlier in our sermon series. It is used in 1 Timothy 3, “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”

The word can describe someone who is devoutly *pious* or *profoundly respectful of God*. But notice that Paul connects godliness with a sound confession in chapter three as well.

It is not just about our passions—although that is an important element. Godliness is good theology that flows from the Gospel. It is the knowledge of Jesus Christ in the heart and mind. And it is a deep commitment to follow where He leads.

One of the keys to remaining faithful to Jesus Christ is not only to reflect on what Jesus Christ has done, but it’s also important to reflect on the vastness and greatness of God. And then we are to reflect Jesus Christ with our lives in the world.

We protect and guard our commitment, faithfulness, and love for Jesus Christ. We flee sin, pursue righteousness, fight for faith, take hold of eternal life, and keep his commandments. These are our spiritual disciplines. This is the good fight of faith.

Another way we fight is to put ourselves to the test. It is to examine our own hearts. We need to think carefully and honestly about who or what has our hearts. Perhaps you noticed, but it really seems like Paul spends a lot of time in chapter six on material wealth. We talked about this a great deal last week. It comes up again in our reading tonight.

In the Large Catechism, as Luther addresses the First Commandment, he says, “A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress. So, to have a God is nothing other than trusting and believing Him with the heart. I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol.”

Earlier, Paul warned Timothy against becoming overly attached to the material world when he warned him not to be a lover of money. It is common to see money as our highest good—as an idol—no matter how much we have. It dominates so many of our decisions.

Paul says, “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.”

In many ways, Paul is simply reiterating that we all, including the wealthy, should resist a love of money. We should not find our security or our hope in wealth. Even those who have money should focus on remaining humble. They should recognize that God actually provides everything.

And he tells the wealthy where they should be “rich.” They should be rich in good works and generosity. And by adopting a generous lifestyle, they will “store up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.”

A lifestyle of generosity is good for all people—but especially the wealthy. In this way our focus is on developing, building, and strengthening our faith first. The kingdom of God is our glorious treasure. We seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness.

Paul even quotes Jesus, saying, “It is better to give than to receive!” Generosity isn’t how you earn your way into heaven. Rather, generosity is a testament—it’s a confession—of what you believe. Our hope should not be set on the things of this world. Our hope is in Christ—and our goal is His soon return.

Now, all of this flows from the Gospel. Our fight. Our confession. Our view of wealth. To set our hope on Christ, to remain faithful to Christ, to confess Christ—we have to know and understand what Christ has done! It’s all interconnected. You cannot separate orthopraxy—right living—from orthodoxy—right worship and right doctrine. The gospel is what drives the way we live, which is why it must be protected.

I like the way Paul says it here, “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.”

He calls on Timothy to avoid the false doctrines of the world. These change from generation to generation. But there is something similar that marks them all. They all think

they know better than the Apostles and Prophets. They reject Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures in some fundamental way. They have access to some kind of secret knowledge.

Of course this is the original error. Remember Satan's temptation at the very beginning in Genesis 3, "Did God actually say?" It is very easy to think we know better. Our opinions often feel right—even when they are wrong. Paul says to avoid that kind of thinking. Don't trust what you think you know. And instead, trust Christ, listen to His Word—and even guard the Gospel.

And so, we must constantly be on guard. This is the fight. We must put the Word before our eyes. We must internalize it. We must think God's thoughts after Him. We must guard our confession—guard our hearts—and guard the Gospel because—one day soon—Jesus will return. This is the day for which we prepare. In the meantime, He is building His Kingdom through the church.

And this is an incredibly helpful reminder for all of us this evening. Despite the distractions, despite the allurements of the world, despite the deceitfulness of riches, despite personal struggles that we all face, our confession of Christ—our reliance on Christ—our loyalty makes all the difference.

The more reliant upon Christ each of us are personally, the stronger we'll be in the local church.

Because that was, after all, Paul's primary concern for the church in Ephesus. That they would press on as a faithful gospel witness in their world.

I can't help but see a parallel between what we've spent the last few months looking at in 1 Timothy and our own Church here at St. John. We have what we need here for a faithful church.

We have talked about what to expect from our pastor. We have talked about the necessity of preaching—and the public reading of Scripture—and the Sacrament of the Altar—and prayer. We need to receive the Gospel regularly. The Gospel is for the Church—even as it is for the world. And this is why we hear Paul stop and confess Christ and His work for us right in the middle of his practical exhortations.

We have learned that Paul expects all servants of the Church to be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. We must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

And then tonight, we have learned to fight the good fight. We guard our good confession. We flee from greed—and pursue godliness and righteousness. We aren't enamored with the things of this world. We give generously of ourselves.

And most importantly, we guard the Gospel, the good deposit that has been entrusted to each of us. Jesus Christ is building His Church. And with humble hearts, we recognize that He has chosen to use us in His work in the world. What a privilege. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*