

The Good Fight

1 Timothy 6:6-19

In First Timothy Paul finished this letter where it began. He opened with a charge to Timothy to follow his instructions, so that he might "fight the good fight" and have "faith and a good conscience" (1:18-19), now he closed with the same charge. "Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and for which you made the good confession." This confession was from Timothy's baptism. Our baptism is the sign and seal that we have given our lives to following the ways of God and had "taken hold of the eternal life" to which God calls every person, the life of faith as one whom God calls "beloved." The writer charged Timothy to live into this name just as Christ Jesus did. What are men and women called to be? Are we all called by our baptisms to be God's workers in our own time? How do we live this out? To what kind of life does our baptism, our "confession," call us?

We are called to a life of "godliness combined with contentment" (v. 6). This way of life does not guarantee worldly success. In fact, Timothy is soundly warned to flee from "the love of money [that] is a root of all kinds of evil" (v. 10)—not to flee from money itself, but from the love or desire of riches, because this temptation leads to discontent and is a deep distraction from a life lived with God.

We are also called by our baptisms to "fight the good fight of the faith" (v. 12). The Greek phrase "fight the good fight" accurately reads "contest the good contest." As one commentator has put it, "Maintaining the faith and living the faith require the energy of a good athlete." A life that enduringly pursues such qualities as "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness" (v. 11) is an athletic life of faith, a life of wholeness and total commitment to the ways of God.

When we understand the training processes for baseball, basketball, hockey, boxing, singing, dancing, acting, playing a musical instrument.....we discover these parallel the list

given by the writer of 1 Timothy. Each requires that the body, mind, spirit, and heart be fully engaged and work interdependently. Striving for "righteousness and godliness," seeking "vision," and finding "belief in action" demand more than an intellectual assent to certain ideas. They require more than a disciplined commitment to a set of rules just to achieve certain goals or skills or even healthful living. Righteousness, godliness, vision, and belief in action are qualities of life that demand the entirety of ourselves—body, mind, spirit, and heart—if they are to lead us in the ways of "faith, love, endurance, gentleness" or the ways of "integrity, persistence, expansion, compassion, acceptance, and surrender."

So, we are to engage our full selves in following the right ways of our God. Intellectual assent without an open heart or the introspection of spirit produces empty words and deeds. Any bodily skill without the direction of thought or the fire of our spirit's will or the feeling of our hearts can be aimlessly narcissistic at best and destructive at worst. Acting on the feelings of the heart without mindful intent and awareness can smother relationship with overcontrol. The spirit's intuition is useless without the mind's direction and the heart's compass. To make "the good confession" and live into the life we are called to by baptism, to "take hold of the eternal life," "to fight the good fight of the faith" (v. 12), we must be fully engaged—body, mind, spirit, and heart—in following the ways of God. **Jane Anne**

Ferguson

Active and courageous choice for true life forms the starting point for Paul's instruction. This is not a passage for moralists, merely meant to condemn the wealthy, or a passage to inspire a futuristic hope in an eternal life to come. Rather, this passage articulates a perspective upon this life that is meant to shape the way humans relate to others and to the material world.

Paul uses two phrases: eternal life and true life. The standard Greek lexicon (Arndt and Gingrich) suggests that this word means "take hold of, grasp, catch, sometimes with violence." Eternal life and true life are the realities to be seized.

Contentment with the basic necessities of life ("food and clothing," v. 8) is put forward as the proper approach to life. The word translated as "contentment" (*autarkeias*) also means

"self-sufficiency." This term, and the attitude it represents, was considered a virtue and was much discussed by the Stoics and the Cynics, two of the most popular philosophical groups in the Hellenistic/Roman world. Paul also used this idea in Philippians 4:11 when he said, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have." In Philippians, Paul credits his ability to be satisfied, regardless of the situation, to Christ, "who strengthens me" (4:13). In Jewish wisdom traditions we are further taught that one comes into the world with nothing, and one leaves with nothing (see Job 1:21; Eccl. 5:15; Wis. 7:6).

The comments on contentment then lead the author to issue warnings about its opposite. Material wealth is dangerous; rather, the greed and love of money that drive the accumulation of riches are dangerous. Those who are caught up in the constant desire for wealth risk becoming ensnared by their own greed and ultimately sink into destruction. The warning is that they will eventually face not financial ruin, but spiritual ruin. To reinforce his words about the dangers of avarice, the writer quotes what was likely a well-known saying, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10). Most ancient writings agree.

Timothy is to flee the wrong and pursue the right, and "fight the good fight," reminds us that faithful living before God is not easy. It requires dedication and hard work, like that of an athlete engaged in an athletic competition. The reward for such persistence and devotion is invaluable—eternal life.

So, Paul instructed his readers to take hold of eternal life. Often we think of eternal life as a futuristic goal, something we get after we have behaved ourselves in this life. However recent scholarship suggests that Paul was talking about something different. Biblical scholar Victor Pfitzner contended that Paul's prize of life is a prize to be seized upon in this life. Modern theological scholarship has also emphasized the present reality of the eternal. Swiss theologian Karl Barth argued that eternity is now! Appealing to Jesus' proclamation that the kingdom of God is "at hand," (Mark 1:15), Barth argued that Christ was not looking into the future but describing a reality of the present: the kingdom has arrived now. Christ's coming interrupts our present time with the eternal. Jürgen Moltmann argued that eternity not merely interrupts present time but even converts present time and creates new life: or eternal life is

not something we look forward to, it is something that has arrived because Christ has arrived and has brought eternity into our midst. The reality of God's life-giving presence (v. 13) establishes itself in this era and shapes the human perspective on life and on the materials of this world: so things are passing; we are not.

Paul's second command is to seize real life. Paul builds a contrast between real life and destructive life. For Paul, destructive life is characterized by the pursuit of riches. He explains, "But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction" (v. 9). The word for "people" suggests that Paul is referring not only to the damage to those who pursue riches, but also the damage to those whose lives are destroyed by their pursuit.

In our day, human trafficking serves as a poignant example of the destructive pursuit of wealth. In the past fifteen years, as many as two million people have left their homes and entered into human slavery—every year. The trafficking of persons is estimated to net around \$10 billion annually; the majority of these persons are forced into sex work, hard labor, or servitude. Many suffer repeated physical and emotional forms of violence that threaten their very existence as humans. While Paul likely was not thinking of human slavery when he detailed the destruction wrought by a pursuit of wealth, the problem of human trafficking illustrates his point clearly: the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (v. 10). Overworking, saving to the point of denying family and self are other signs of dependence on wealth. By contrast, the love of the God "who gives life to all things" affirms the *real* life of ourselves and of others.

The instruction does not exclude the monied among us. Those who are financially rich "in the present age" are called to "be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share" (vv. 17-18) so that they might stay focused on God's ways. According to Paul, this *real* life is one of generosity and good works (v. 18). In our capitalist societies driven by competition and self-interest, acts of self-sacrifice appear to limit one's life. How is it possible that one lays hold of life through an act of self-giving? According to theologian Paul Tillich faith is the integrating factor for all of human life; faith provides unity for life and enables persons to function. We

can orient our lives around wealth, social status, politics, God, or a religious institution. Some of these are ultimate and lasting, and some of them are not; some persons have faith in that which is ultimate, while others orient their lives around that which is temporary or that which disintegrates and destroys. Tillich, like Paul, claims that wealth and power are unreliable objects of faith, for they are fleeting and provide little hope in the face of death. In contrast, generosity and good works affirm real life, because they arise from faith in the ultimate. Such generosity becomes real life because it is an authentic act based on faith in the eternity of life. So the self-giving life is not a negation of life but an affirmation of the eternity of life: by God life was given, is being given, and will be given. With this new orientation, persons can make active and courageous choices to affirm the existence of their lives and the lives of those around them. **Stephanie Mar Smith**

Finally, in verses 17-19, the author returns to the topic of wealth, this time offering instructions for those in the community who are already rich. This means these instructions are for people of financial means, and therefore to us. Wealth itself is not condemned, but rather the improper attitude toward wealth. Wealth is still seen as possessing inherent danger; one can wrongly place ultimate value on material goods, rather than on God, who is the source of all things. Those who have riches are to make proper use of them, which means they are to use their wealth "to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share" (v. 18).

This text abounds with sound insight about the proper attitude toward wealth. With the exception of sexual misconduct, nothing discredits the work of the church in the eyes of the world more than financial greed and corruption. The advice of the author of the Pastorals is as pertinent to the church today as it was to its original audience. **Mitchell G. Reddish**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).