

Living in God's Church Today

Wage the Good Warfare

1 Timothy 1:18-20

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Wage the Good Warfare

Scripture

Paul stated the reason for writing his First Letter to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:14–15, “I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.” Paul wanted Timothy to teach believers how to live in God’s church. Paul’s letter to Timothy is still immensely useful to us as it teaches us how to live in God’s church today.

Paul began his letter by commanding Timothy to charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine (1:3-11). After giving thanks for his salvation and call to service (1:12-17), Paul returned to his charge to Timothy.

Let us read about Paul’s charge in 1 Timothy 1:18-20:

¹⁸This 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, ¹⁹holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, ²⁰among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. (1 Timothy 1:18-20)

Introduction

The cliffs around Cape St. George, just south of Jervis Bay in South Australia, were notorious for shipwrecks. Therefore, it was decided that a lighthouse was needed for the safe

navigation of coastal shipping. In 1857, Colonial Architect Alexander Dawson began looking for a site suitable for a lighthouse on Cape St. George. Unfortunately, Dawson was more interested in the ease of construction than in providing an effective navigation aid.

When the Pilots Board went to verify the location Dawson chose, they found that the site was not visible from the required approaches. They also found Dawson's map suffered from "discrepancies so grave that it is impossible to decide whether position(s) marked on the map really exist." The board also suspected that Dawson chose the site solely because it was situated close to a quarry from which he planned to obtain stones for construction.

Despite the glaring deficiencies and disagreement by a majority of the board, for reasons not known, the chairman of the board authorized the construction of the lighthouse. For the next four decades, the ill-sited lighthouse was responsible for some two dozen shipwrecks. Eventually, in 1899, the lighthouse was replaced by the Point Perpendicular Lighthouse in a much more suitable location on this part of the coast.¹

For four decades, a lighthouse stood where it should not have stood. Rather than pointing out danger to passing ships, it lured ships onto the very rocks they were trying to avoid.

False teachers are like this lighthouse. Rather than help people navigate safely to heaven, they lure unwitting listeners on to the rocks of error and make shipwrecks of their faith.

Paul was very concerned about this problem in Ephesus. He wrote to Timothy and commanded him to charge the false teachers not to teach any different doctrine (1:3).

¹ See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2018/december/lighthouse-that-wrecked-more-ships-than-it-saved.html>.

In today's lesson, he renewed that charge to Timothy. Though Paul's charge was to Timothy, the principle of Paul's charge applies to elders serving in God's church today.

Lesson

1 Timothy 1:18-20 shows us several responsibilities of elders living in God's church today.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Elders Must Wage the Good Warfare (1:18)
2. Elders Must Hold Faith (1:19a)
3. Elders Must Hold a Good Conscience (1:19b)
4. Elders Must Hand Contumacious Offenders Over to Satan (1:19c-20)

I. Elders Must Wage the Good Warfare (1:18)

First, elders must wage the good warfare.

Returning to the command he had given to Timothy to charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine (1 Timothy 1:3), Paul continued in verse 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.”** Paul stressed the fact that when he commanded Timothy to charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine that his command was **in accordance with the prophecies previously made** about him. So Timothy's call was not just his idea. These prophecies had specifically and supernaturally called Timothy into God's service. We are not told what the content of these prophecies was or when they were given. Paul reminded Timothy that God had called him into his service by means of prophecies.

I was converted to Christ when I was nineteen years old. I was in the South African Air Force at the time and I was home on leave from a deployment in the Angolan civil war. About a year later, I finished my military service and started as a student at the University of Cape Town. During a mid-winter break, I was home with my parents. They were attending a Baptist Church and so I did as well. I asked to be baptized, and Pastor Trevor Eayrs talked to me about baptism. One Sunday evening, in mid-winter, two other baptismal candidates and I were baptized. As I recall, I was the last one to be baptized. Unfortunately, the water in the baptismal pool was very cold because the water heater did not work. Each candidate briefly shared how he came to faith in Jesus. Then the pastor baptized us. I did not remember the pastor telling me to hold my nose and so when he baptized me, I got water up my nose. I came up spluttering and gagging! I tried to leave but the pastor stopped me. He said, “Freddy, I believe that God is going to call you into his service to become a pastor.” That was shocking to me because I was not planning to do so. However, several years later, I did sense the calling of the Lord. Now, Pastor Eayrs was not claiming the gift of prophecy. But what he said made an impact on me and it turned out to be prescient.

By these prophecies, Timothy was to **“wage the good warfare”** (or “fight the good fight” *NASB*). Paul often used military illustrations. The picture of warfare is appropriate because Timothy was to engage in conflict with the false teachers. He was to oppose false doctrine by teaching true doctrine, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

God calls certain men to shepherd the flock of God. Their calls are not usually as dramatic as Paul’s was with his Damascus Road call from the resurrected Lord Jesus. But they are still genuine. And God calls elders even today to **“wage**

the good warfare” against error. One of the tasks of elders is to refute error and proclaim truth. They are to stand firm against those who mislead the people of God. They are to feed God’s people the word of God in such a way that they grow by it.

Your elders do a great job of waging the good warfare. They pray for you. They watch out for you as men who must give an account to the Lord Jesus Christ for how well they have shepherded you. They seek to teach you the good news of the gospel of Jesus. They are constantly on watch against error. I am so grateful to God for the elders who serve you as men who wage the good warfare, and I hope you are grateful too.

II. Elders Must Hold Faith (1:19a)

Second, elders must hold faith.

Paul wanted Timothy to wage the good warfare against the false teachers, **“holding faith”** (1:19a). As Timothy stood firmly against the error and for the truth, he was to continue holding fast to the truth of God’s word and God’s gospel. He was to hold to a body of truth that was the content of the Bible.

Elders frequently engage in correction of error. Most often it is with the flock of God. These are believers who are learning and growing. Usually, these believers want to understand God’s word correctly and apply it carefully to their lives. And so elders teach and correct with love and affection. However, there are times when other teachers distort aspects of God’s truth. It is often a small deviation but when it is carried to its logical conclusion, it becomes a serious distortion and error. This is where elders must wage the good warfare, **“holding faith.”** This is not the time to avoid conflict but pastors and elders must engage in conflict for the sake of the truth of

God and the gospel.

We live in a time in which we have the completed canon of Scripture. We have the written Word of God. In addition, we also have a summary of the teaching of the Bible which is contained in *The Westminster Standards*. Those documents are not on the same level as the Bible. However, we believe that they are a faithful summary of the teaching of the Bible. And they are a wonderful guide in many disputes.

You may have heard some believers say, “No creed but the Bible.” They are usually believers who want to be faithful and true to the teaching of the Bible. But even that statement – “No creed but the Bible” – is in fact a credal statement! And when one asks what they believe about God the Father or Jesus the Son or sin or salvation, they have to come up with some teaching from the Bible. Well, *The Westminster Standards* are simply a summary of the various doctrines from the Bible. And the fact that *The Westminster Standards* have been in use for over 350 years tells us that it is an outstanding guide.

Once again, I want to commend our elders to you. They hold the faith very well. They know God’s Word. They know *The Westminster Standards*. They point believers to hold to a body of truth that is the content of the Bible.

III. Elders Must Hold a Good Conscience (1:19b)

Third, elders must hold a good conscience.

Timothy was not only to hold faith but he was also to hold **“a good conscience”** (1:19b). He was to pay attention to his self-judging faculty and measure it constantly against God’s law. He was to seek God’s affirmation, assurance, peace, and joy as he engaged in conflict with men who were distorting the truth of God’s word.

Sometimes someone will claim to be bound by his conscience to do something. We must be very careful here. Our conscience is not a perfect guide. And we must always evaluate issues in light of God's Word.

You recall that Martin Luther was the man God used to start what is known as the Protestant Reformation in 1517. He came to believe that we come into a right relationship with God by grace alone in Christ alone by faith alone. In other words, we are justified by faith alone. His writings about this truth enraged the Pope. Luther was called to answer for what the Pope considered heresy. In a trial about his views in which he insisted that only the Word of God would cause him to change his mind, Luther asked for time to consider his answer. The next day, before the assembly Luther once again insisted that only biblical authority would sway him. "My conscience is captive to the Word of God," he told the court. "I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither honest nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."²

My point is that a good conscience lines up with the Word of God. It is guided by the Word of God and it submits to the Word of God.

Your elders hold a good conscience. They seek to live their lives and shape their teaching by the Word of God.

IV. Elders Must Hand Contumacious Offenders Over to Satan (1:19c-20)

And finally, elders must hand contumacious offenders over to Satan.

² Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, Updated 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: Word Pub., 1995), 242.

Paul wrote in verses 19c-20, **“By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”** The false teachers had rejected “faith and a good conscience” (1:19a-b). They were teaching error and promoting doctrine that was in opposition to the good news of the gospel. Thus, their faith was shipwrecked on the rocks of error and falsehood.

Paul then named two of the false teachers, **Hymenaeus and Alexander**, presumably because they were the leading teachers and would not even submit to Paul’s correction. Therefore, Paul said, he **“handed [them] over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”** This is a reference to excommunication.

Paul understood that there are only two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Communicant church members are part of the kingdom of God. Those who are not communicant church members are part of the kingdom of Satan. By handing them over to Satan, Paul was using a technical expression to indicate that these two men were removed from the realm of God’s care and protection in the church so that they were now back in the sphere where Satan was at work. The goal of excommunication was to bring them back to repentance and reconciliation with the church. It is a very serious matter to be excommunicated from the body of Christ.

The vast majority of churches today do not practice church discipline. But some do. It is not easy and the elders of those churches where discipline is practiced do not take this responsibility lightly. Unfortunately, the majority of church members view their church membership as they do their membership at a gym, a golf club, or a reading group. If they don’t like the rules, they just move on. And of course, most other

institutions do not have “excommunication” procedures as does the church. What often happens is that when a church member sins, he simply leaves the church. But church discipline, properly practiced, as our *Book of Church Order* states, is done “to maintain the glory of God, the purity of his church, and the keeping and reclaiming of disobedient sinners” (BCO 27-3).

Your elders are committed to church discipline. They engage in it very carefully and prayerfully. They know that they are weak and sinful men and prone to sin themselves, and so they do not engage in discipline lightly. Nevertheless, if necessity warrants it, they will hand contumacious offenders over to Satan “to maintain the glory of God, the purity of his church, and [for] the keeping and reclaiming of disobedient sinners” (BCO 27-3).

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the concept of a charge in 1 Timothy 1:18-20, let us uphold our elders and thank God for them.

In the film *Greyhound*, actor Tom Hanks plays the captain of a US destroyer that is commanding the escorts of a 37-ship convoy. They are crossing the Atlantic in 1942, at the height of the “Battle of the Atlantic.” The story focuses on the three days that the convoy is in the “Mid-Atlantic Gap,” where they do not enjoy the benefits of air-cover. The convoy is subjected to relentless attack by a U-boat “wolf pack.” The U-boats sink seven ships from the convoy and one of the accompanying escorts. The escorts in turn sink a number of the U-boats. The majority of the convoy makes it through, delivering essential troops and supplies.

The intensity of the combat is unrelenting. Hanks is on the bridge of his ship throughout. A running motif of the film is that he never gets to eat. His stewards keep preparing him food, and bringing it to him, but when it arrives there is yet another attack and the food almost invariably crashes to the deck. In a poignant scene towards the end, he changes his boots for slippers because his feet are bloodied by standing for such a long period.

The film is based on the book *The Good Shepherd* by C. S. Forester, and the title indicates the spiritual symbolism of the story. Hanks' character is clearly a committed Christian, who is shown praying at his bedside, and he has a prominent sticker of Hebrews 13:8 ("Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever") in his cabin.³

Elders are called to protect the flock of God from the attacks of the enemy and to ensure that they reach their heavenly destination safely. They seek to do so in imitation of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. They will get their feet bloodied, if necessary, to shepherd the flock of God faithfully.

So, let me encourage you to pray for your elders. Support them as they lead you. And submit to them as they hold forth the Word of God so that we can all grow in the knowledge and grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as we all continue to live in God's church today. Amen.

³ See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2020/october/film-portrays-good-shepherd-protecting-his-flock.html>.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. <https://tampabaypresbyterian.org/SermonAudio>.
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp.
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