

Theme: Fight the good fight.

Text: 1 Timothy 6:11-16

¹¹ But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. ¹² Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³ In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴ to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶ who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.

The Word of God we'll consider today – our reading from 1 Timothy. Let's begin with prayer:

Jesus, lead us on, till our rest is won. Amen.

Does anyone recognize the name “Don Schlitz”? He died just this year, in April over in Nashville, Tennessee. He was a country music songwriter who made a lot of people famous for singing his songs. In fact, he wrote 24 chart topping songs for country artists including hits like “Forever and Ever, Amen” and “When You Say Nothing at All.” But perhaps his most famous contribution was a song made famous by Kenny Rodgers in 1978 called “The Gambler.” In the refrain he wrote words that became iconic:

You've got to know when to hold 'em
Know when to fold 'em
Know when to walk away
And know when to run...

Now, there's more to that song than just those words, but they sum up the spirit of that song which resonated with a lot of people, even if you never gambled. People found a message in that song that seemed to connect in all kinds of situations in life that might be played out for better or worse. The song suggests that the trick is to recognize what's worth keeping, to pick your battles, and to not dwell on your losses.

Like much folk wisdom we as Christians can find a grain of truth in such a song... but we don't need to settle for just the grain when we have the Bread of Life before us today. In our sermon text St. Paul takes the folk wisdom of a song like “The Gambler” and puts some much needed spiritual meat on the bones. We'll look to these words from our God today under the theme Paul drops in our text – **Fight the good fight** – as we consider how to play out our hand in many situations of life, how to pick our battles, and how to hold on to the only thing that's worth keeping.

When Paul wrote these words, he was an older man... a man who had lived through a lot and was trying to pass on some wisdom to his young pastoral pupil Timothy. But these are not just words that are valuable for pastors to consider – every Christian can and should take them to heart and consider how God would have us apply them in our own lives and various callings.

As God tells us to **fight the good fight** we see a few different encouragements wrapped up in this command. Sometimes we are to flee. Sometimes we need to fight. But always we're told to hold on. Let's walk through each of those thoughts briefly.

Paul begins our text saying: **But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.** If you read the context of chapter six you'd find that Paul is specifically urging Timothy to flee from the temptation of greed that some supposed religious leaders fall prey to. But certainly, the call to flee temptation is not restricted in the Bible to fleeing from greed. You might think of Joseph running from Potiphar's wife to avoid the sin of sexual immorality... or David running from King Saul when he hurled spears at him or sent soldiers to kill him rather than giving into sinful anger and taking the life of God's anointed king.

Know when to walk away... know when to run... yes, there are times when the best strategy is to physically remove yourself from temptation by putting distance between you and sin.

- If you struggle with keeping your cool maybe walking away to calm down and pray would be wiser than answering your spouse or coworker in anger.
- If you struggle with addiction maybe staying far from people and places that feed such desires would be wiser than trying to tough it out at a bar or a party or in a casino or on the internet – depending on what addictions you struggle with.
- If you're tempted with vanity and pride – or the other side of that coin – self-loathing and despair... well, maybe avoiding the comparison game of social media would be wise as you remove things like Facebook or Instagram from your phone or computer.

I think you get the point. Sometimes we think more highly of our ability to win the battles with temptation than we should. Sometimes we need to flee temptation instead of squaring off to do battle with it. When you read God's Word regularly, you'll find help in discerning when you need to flee. But notice Paul also urges Timothy not simply to flee aimlessly. We run away from sin and evil and toward the good things God would have his people focus on: **pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.**

We find our righteousness not in ourselves but in Jesus who was righteous for us. In him we find our right standing with God and the motivation to live a righteous life of our own. This is what a godly life looks like, one that models our lives after our Savior God and his Word. Through faith in Jesus we find peace and forgiveness. In the love of Jesus we find our comfort and hope. In the endurance and gentleness of Jesus we find the patience and kindness needed to respond to our neighbor in every difficulty or need.

But what happens when running doesn't work? You can pick your battles to be sure... but that means sometimes you have to stand and fight. You can't run away from work every time you're called on to work with a difficult person. You can't just run off and abandon your family when relationships at home become tense or frustrated. And of course, you can't run from yourself either... your sinful nature brings sinful thoughts into view that you have to do battle with daily.

This is something that some Christians have had to learn the hard way. There are accounts in the early church of Christians who were so fed up with the sinfulness of the world and the temptations all around them that they fled to the deserts and mountains alone to be hermits that lived apart from others, thinking this might allow them some peace from sin and temptation.

What they forgot... and soon found out by experience... is that they still had a sinful nature that could bring sinful thoughts and images to mind no matter where they were or how isolated they tried to be. This is why Jesus prayed for his disciples to be in the world, but not of the world. There will be times we can't get away from temptation and we will have to brace for battle.

But how do we stand in this world and fight sin and temptation when we ourselves are sinners? Again, looking to God's Word is key. Can we do battle with sin and evil? Yes. Can we do this on our own? Absolutely not. Paul gives good encouragement in this regard in his letter to the Ephesians where he writes in chapter 6: **Be made strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes... with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace... take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Ephesians 6 (selected verses)**

Flee when you can – but when you have to stand, stand dressed in the armor of God and wield the Word of God as your weapon. And just like a real weapon, you'll get better at using it the more you use it! So, use it Christian! Read it, hear it, live by it – and find yourself fit for the battle when running isn't an option.

Finally, Paul also reminds us of one more important aspect to the good fight of the faith when he says in our sermon text: **Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called...**

When you were called to faith by the gospel eternal life was given to you. In baptism the name of your eternal Triune God was placed on you and heaven was gifted as your inheritance. By faith in Jesus you will live forever. You have a soul that will never die... a body that will be raised in glory just like Jesus. There is waiting for all believers a real and lasting life that cannot be touched by sadness or taken away by sin ever again. And God tells us here to **take hold** of that! Cling to it! Clasp on to it! Never let it go! Because there is nothing worth taking hold of besides that life which Jesus earned for us on the cross and cemented for us with his empty tomb.

So, when you find yourself wanting to hold on to this life and the things of this life, remember there is only one life worth holding on to – life in Jesus. Cling to that life... be refreshed in that life through Word and Sacrament like you're doing today... because Jesus is better than the riches of this life, or the pleasures of this life, or the triumphs of this life, or even the good gifts of this life like creation and comfort and friends and family. Enjoy the good gifts God gives in this life, but remember they are only small glimpses of the life that is coming where **eternal pleasures** wait at God's right hand as we are told in the Psalms.

And eternity is coming! Paul reminds us of that as he closes our text with the encouragement to stand firm on our confession of Christ, just as Jesus himself stood firm and confessed the truth even when it cost him everything. And because of Jesus we know that when eternity dawns we will join in the doxology of praise not just word, not just by faith, but also by sight. God keep you to that day brothers and sisters. And until it comes hold fast to Jesus as you fight the good fight. Amen.