

WAGE THE GOOD WARFARE

by Ray C. Stedman

It is sometimes helpful to pick out certain verses of a biblical passage which summarize in concise terms what the passage is all about. We have a phrase which does just that in this section from Chapter 1 of Paul's first letter to Timothy, beginning with Verse 18:

This charge I commit to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophetic utterances which pointed to you, that inspired by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith, among them Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. {1 Tim 1:18-20 RSV}

The phrase that summarizes this entire letter is,

"Wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience."

That is the heart of all that Paul says in this letter to Timothy.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul says of himself, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing," {2 Tim 4:7-8 RSV}. There is the word of a man who is about to leave the battle of life. But here in First Timothy is Paul's word to this young Christian, probably in his early or mid-twenties, who is being left to do a very dangerous and demanding work in Ephesus. The apostle tells him to "Wage the good warfare," and, "Hold fast to faith and to a good conscience."

Notice that Paul puts it very definitely. He does not say, "Fight a good fight," or, "Wage a good warfare." This is not the word of a coach encouraging someone to get in there and do his best. Paul is talking about the Christian life.

The fundamental nature of Christianity is that it is a warfare in which we are all involved; and there is no exit until the end. The moment you began your Christian life, by faith in Jesus Christ, you entered a lifelong battle. And this struggle is not intended to be easy. Many Christians today forget that. Helped along somewhat by a lot of misleading teaching on the television and other media, there is a widespread attitude today that when you become a Christian God began working for you so everything has to work out. People are being taught that they are in the will of God because bridges appear mysteriously across the chasms of life. Rubbish! If that is the sign of being in God's will, then Paul was out of God's will most of his life. He knew he was in a battle, and he tells Timothy that he too is going to be in a battle.

The object of this warfare is not to survive to the end of life, as many Christians think. Even non-Christians are fighting the battle to keep healthy and stay alive. Everybody is engaged in that battle. That is not the Christian warfare. Paul is talking about being a Christian, about living a Christ-like life in the midst of dangerous pressures and countering forces. That is the battle. In other words, to be realistic in a world of illusion, to not chase after all the fantasies that the world falls for, to not allow yourself to think wrongly about what is going on in society, but to get God's point of view, to see things the way they are and to deal honestly, realistically and openly with everything that comes -- that is the battle.

That is the way Jesus dealt with life. He did not hide away in some monastery. He was out in the midst of life, in the marketplaces, in the cities, among peoples, under the pressures and dangers of everyday life. He was a realist who dealt earnestly and honestly with life.

The battle Paul is talking about is to be a loving person who has concern and compassion for people in times of harassment, when others are giving way to expressions of hate and violence and bigotry. The battle is to live redemptively among those who have lost their way, to turn them away from that which is destroying, to be involved with them and to give of yourself in order to bring them back into a relationship of truth and reality. The warfare is to live your life for a purpose, not merely to spend it on yourself.

What makes it tough is that we are opposed by three resourceful and utterly ruthless enemies called, the world, the flesh, and the devil. People are not the enemy. I do not know why it is so difficult to get this across, but I find that very many Christians are confused at this point. They think their problems are other people, but Paul tells us in Ephesians 6, "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood," {cf, Eph 6:12a KJV}. People are not the problem. The world thinks, "If we could just get rid of the IRS, or our in-laws, or our bosses, or change the administration. Those people are sabotaging our plans, wrecking our lives and making things difficult for us." But people are not the problem. All people are victims, according to the Word of God, victims like ourselves. They need compassion and understanding, not condemnation and ostracism. Behind people are the real enemies -- the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The world is society, committed to a godless philosophy which says, "Enjoy yourself now. This is all you've got. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die." This philosophy is shouted at us every time we turn on a television or a radio. Everywhere we hear, "You deserve the best. You've got it coming to you. Take it now. Don't let anybody stand in your way." That is the world, the enemy that opposes us.

Then there is the flesh, this alien nature within us which used to belong to us, but, since we have come to Christ, it is no longer us; we have been delivered from it. But it is still there, opposing us from within. It is dedicated to selfishness. It loves attention, and comfort, and anything illegal, immoral, or fattening. The enemy is this self-centeredness within us:

I had a little tea party this afternoon at three.
'Twas very small, three guests in all,
Just I, myself and me.
'Twas I who ate the sandwiches
And I drank up the tea.
'Twas also I who ate the pie
And passed the cake to me.

That is life. That is the flesh.

Then there is the devil, and all the hosts of fallen angels that Scripture speaks of, and of which Jesus took constant note in his ministry. These master psychologists know exactly what it takes to make us feel fearful, angry, discouraged, or worthless. When we feel any one of those emotions we have already succumbed to what the Bible calls, "the wiles of the devil," {Eph 6:11b}. The devil has accomplished his purpose, at least temporarily, with us.

So there is the battle -- to be Christ-like, loving, forgiving, understanding, and pure in the midst of those pressures. This is what Paul is referring to when he encourages Timothy to, "Wage the good warfare."

If you want some helpful books on this, I suggest you read *The Screwtape Letters*, by C. S. Lewis. This is a great revelation of how the devil gets at us in our thought life. Or read *Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan, that incomparable record of what the Christian life is like on its way to glory, and the nature of the enemies that face us. John Bunyan was given great insight into the warfare the Christian is involved in.

It is rather startling to note here the incentives Paul uses to stimulate Timothy to "wage the good warfare." I would expect at this point that Paul would say something like, "Remember, Timothy, 'He that is in you is greater than he that is in the world,'" because that is a great truth. We are not left alone in this battle. We have inner fortifications and strengthenings that the world knows nothing about, because, "He that is in us is greater than he that is in the world," {cf, 1 Jn 4:4}. But Paul does not say that. Nor does he say what Peter says, that, "we will be kept by the power of God unto salvation," {cf, 1 Pet 1:5 KJV}. Nor does Paul say, with

Jude, "Now unto Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before his presence in glory," {cf, Jude 1:24 KJV}. Though these things are true, Paul uses something much more humble and prosaic, something much closer to home. He refers to Timothy's desire to please him, and to Timothy's hunger to fulfill the possibilities that others saw in him.

So this is what Paul wrote: "This charge I commit to you, Timothy, my son." That personal, affectionate word must have greatly encouraged this young man's heart. He thought, "Paul considers himself my father. He loves me as a son. He trusts me. He believes in me. He sent me here to labor in Ephesus."

Years ago, a young man said something that struck me very forcibly. His father, whom he idolized, had just died, and he said to me, "What do you do when the only man you have ever wanted to please is dead?" I sensed that he had lost incentive, that a great moral force had disappeared from his life. It helps a great deal to know that someone believes in you, and trusts you.

So Timothy must have been greatly encouraged by this. Paul urges him to the task of waging a good warfare by remembering that he believed in him, and had confidence in him. But even more than that, there were certain "prophetic utterances" that pointed to Timothy, the apostle says. Evidently this is something that occurred when Timothy was set aside by the church at Lystra to accompany Paul in his travels, (Acts 16). Timothy, half Greek, half Jew, had been a Christian since Paul's first visit to that city about a year or more earlier. Having been observed by the church for that period of time, Timothy had grown so in grace and spiritual stature that the church agreed with Paul's suggestion that he come along with him on his travels.

The elders of that church gathered around Timothy, as Paul tells us in the second letter to Timothy, and laid their hands on him, and at that time certain prophetic utterances were given. We are not told what they were, but evidently, speaking by the Spirit, someone predicted what Timothy's ministry would be like. This must have been somewhat like Jacob's blessings of his sons, recorded in the 49th chapter of Genesis, where Jacob predicts what the nature of their ministry will be. So Paul reminds Timothy that, by the Spirit, God had led certain ones to indicate that this young man was to have a great ministry. It would be an encouragement to him to remember that.

I will never forget an incident in my own ministry when I was a young man. I was still a student at Dallas Seminary, but was spending my summers in Pasadena. I worked one summer as a youth minister in a church there, when Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, the President and founder of Dallas Seminary, a great man of God, a great man of faith, came into town. He was gracious enough to spend an afternoon with my wife and me.

I took Dr. Chafer to the church where I was working and showed him around the very impressive, beautiful building. The congregation at this time did not have a pastor, though they were seeking one, so Dr. Chafer said to me, "Do you think you might end up here in this church?" I said, "I don't know. Who knows what God will do? I don't have any particular plans for that." "I don't know either," he said, "but it would be a good place for you because I believe God is going to give you a great ministry." I do not know what he had in mind by that. He may have been impressed by the beauty of that building. (I am sure he did not realize that someday I would end up in a building like this, where the architecture is clearly early Safeway!) But his words have been a great encouragement to my heart. Many times as a young man I remembered that Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer had seen something in me that was an encouragement.

Sometimes the great promises are too much for us to handle. What we need is something right at hand -- the remembrance that somebody believes in us, that somebody has confidence that God is going to do something with us. That is what Paul says would encourage Timothy -- "inspired by them you may wage the good warfare." The central thing, of course, is, "How do you wage the good warfare?" Paul says it requires two things: "holding faith, and a good conscience." Hold to your faith, he says. Believe what God has told you:

- Faith is accepting the radical truth which Jesus and his apostles have given to us, understanding that this is a description of life as it really is.
- Faith is believing truth about God, about his power, about his control of history and all humanity, of his love for us as a lost race which he does not choose to abandon, but takes steps to redeem and bring

to himself.

- Faith is learning about the nature of sin and the reason why life is often filled with misery, not because of others, but because of us. We are the problem. We have something within us that is constantly destroying our plans, wrecking our happiness and destroying our relationships. This needs to be dealt with, and the only thing that can handle it is the word of the cross; learning what Jesus did in the mystery of the darkness of the cross, how some transference was made in a most remarkable way in which our sin was placed on him and his righteousness was given to us.
- Faith is learning about his resurrection and the impartation of his life so that he himself comes to live within us -- "Christ in us, the hope of glory," {cf, Col 1:27b}.
- Faith is learning that he himself will grant to us in every situation the wisdom and the power that it takes to live righteous, godly, Christ-like lives.
- Faith involves taking all this personally, to ourselves, believing that God has done this for us.

We now have our resources, our power to live coming from him. Hold to that, Paul says. Do not deviate from it. Do not lose that. That is your ground of security. That is the resource from which you can live.

But with faith there must be a good conscience.

I find a great deal of misunderstanding, even among Christians, on what the conscience is. Many feel that the conscience is given to us to teach us the difference between right and wrong. But nothing could be further from the truth. No, the conscience is given to us, rather, to resist any deviation from the truth, from the right and the wrong that we know. If you think it is given to us to indicate what is wrong or what is right, you will begin to rely upon your feelings to determine right and wrong. That is where many go astray -- many young Christians, especially. They think their conscience is their feelings; and if they feel something is right then they do it.

You have seen the bumper stickers that say, "If it feels good, do it." People actually believe that is following their conscience. Because of that philosophy thousands and thousands of lives are being warped and twisted.

The conscience is given to us so that when we know what is right and what is wrong, it insists that we do the right and avoid the wrong. But it is the Word of God that teaches us what is right and what is wrong. Conscience is like a gyroscope, set in a certain direction, which resists any tendency to deflect it. Conscience, however, can be set in a wrong direction, then it will guide us wrongly. Revelation, the Word of God, is what tells us what is right and what is wrong. Conscience is given to us to help us know when we are beginning to fail, or fall away from that right path.

In other words, a good conscience is a synonym for an obedient heart which wants to do what God says is right. That is what Paul is talking about. Wherever God speaks, and you know what he tells you to do, regardless of what your flesh or your feelings say, obey; do what God says. That is the way to maintain a good conscience. If you fail, correct it instantly by the provision that God has made: confess, repent, set it straight, then go on with God.

A good conscience works with faith, that which lays hold of the resources of God in dependence on him. So a good conscience is the discipline of the mind and the will that says, "I will follow my Lord and do what he says to do." Jesus spoke of this. He put the Christian life in a nutshell when he said, "You in me, and I in you," {John 14:20b RSV}. "You in me" -- that is our definite determination to follow him; "I in you" -- that is the resource he commits to us to enable us to follow and to obey him. The Christian life is these two things working constantly: to know what is right, and, by the power and grace of God, to resolve to do it. That is waging a good warfare. How beautifully that maintains the biblical balance between the sovereignty of God and the free will of man! Here is the secret of Christian vitality. When God tells you what is right, by his grace, relying on him, choose to do it.

This is so important that Paul expands on it. He says, "By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith." These are people who know the truth, but because they have not chosen to obey it, they not only have wandered away, they have eventually damaged their faith. They start believing wrong instead of right. They know what is right, but they are no longer able to do it.

Today we are surrounded by hundreds of examples of people who have ship-wrecked their faith by failing to keep a good conscience. The order is very important. Somehow, when you choose not to do something you know is right, you introduce confusion into your whole mechanism of guidance in the Christian life. You start to follow wrong paths which begin to determine and deflect your faith. You no longer see things the way you once did.

I am reminded of the young man who drew the plans for this church building many years ago. He and his wife, a vigorous young Christian couple, joined our congregation. He was raised on the mission field, the son of missionary parents. He was a pilot, and I flew with him several times in a private plane. On long trips together I came to know him very well. We studied the Word of God together, and he grew in faith, and evidence of understanding. He went on to seminary for four years, then after graduating he taught in a Bible school. Somewhere, about that time, however, he failed to obey what God had set before him to do. Soon afterwards he dropped out of his teaching position. After a bit his marriage broke up. Today he is living in the Sierra Nevadas, teaching school. He is on his third marriage. He has totally denied his Christian faith, claiming now to be an atheist. He has made shipwreck of his faith and of that of his family as well.

This happens frequently today. It explains why some outstanding Christian leaders whom you yourself have followed, people you have held up as an example of faith and commitment, have suddenly fallen, because they did not hold to conscience; they did not obey what they taught. Somewhere along the line they thought the holding of the truth in the mind was enough.

Paul speaks of two such men here, Hymenaeus and Alexander. We do not know much about them, although they are mentioned elsewhere in these letters to Timothy. In the second letter, Hymenaeus is said to be one who taught that the resurrection was already past, overthrowing the faith of some, (2 Tim. 2:18). Yet Paul does not say that Hymenaeus had begun by deviating from doctrine. Somewhere along the line, as Paul suggests here, he had not practiced truth; he had rejected conscience. That led him at last to the error he espoused.

In the second letter to Timothy, Paul speaks of Alexander, the coppersmith, who, he says, had done him great harm. "Beware of him, Timothy," Paul says. "He will do you a lot of damage if you get mixed up with him," {cf, 2 Tim 4:14-15}. What harm he had done the apostle we do not know, but it was this Alexander evidently who had chosen not to act upon truth that he knew, had not followed with a careful, close heart to the Lord, but had rejected conscience and had ultimately "shipwrecked his faith." Paul says of these two, "I have delivered them to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme."

This is not a single act, suddenly taken in the heat of anger. This is the result of a long course of spiritual deterioration which ends in the fourth step suggested by our Lord in Matthew 18. (Last Sunday we had to take the third step in regard to a brother in our midst.) There in Matthew 18, the Lord says that step one is, if your brother has done something wrong, committed a sin, turned aside, go to him and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, that is the end of the matter; you have gained your brother. But if he does not, then take two or three with you and go again. That is step two. If he hears them, fine; say no more to anybody else. But if he does not, there has to come the time when you tell it to the church. That is the third step. The whole church is to be engaged in trying to reach an erring brother or sister, someone who has turned aside from the faith. If he does not hear them, then the fourth step comes, which Paul calls, "delivering [him] unto Satan." Jesus said, "Let him be unto you as a publican and a sinner" {cf, Matt 18:17}, i.e., as not even being a Christian. By this Paul means, put him back into the world; regard him as having denied by his actions the testimony of his words. This does not mean to have no contact with him. This is not an act of excommunication that affects his spiritual life. It is clear from this very passage that Paul intends this to be remedial -- so that these men may learn that testifying of truth but not acting on it is blasphemy. This is destroying the image of God in the eyes of others, making God look ridiculous because they are not consistent in the walk. So Paul says, "I have turned them over. Let Satan have his way with them. He will damage them,

he will hurt them, he will destroy much of their lives, but in the process they will learn that the One who loves them, who can heal them. who can forgive them, is God alone." So this action is to be taken with the hope that they will eventually return to the Lord.

After last Sunday's service I heard of a very remarkable incident. Some friends here in the congregation told me that when one of their friends, a young Christian man, was journeying by bus from Denver, Colorado, to Washington, D. C., a few weeks ago, he sat beside another young man who told him that his name was John W. Hinckley, Jr. During the whole course of that long bus ride of well over fifteen hundred miles, this young Christian witnessed to John Hinckley. The next day the terrible news broke that Hinckley had attempted to assassinate the President of the United States. Yet this man had just heard a long Christian witness, lovingly given, which must have reminded him that he came from a Christian family, and that God had made many attempts to turn him toward righteousness and truth.

This morning after the 8:15 service a woman told me the sequel to the story, on good evidence, that Hinckley's father visited him in prison during this last week and was enabled to lead him to the Lord. This is a case of a young man who may even have been a Christian (at least he was exposed to Christian testimony) who had rejected conscience and had lost faith. But God has not rejected him. He has sought him and is taking him through deep and dark things. Prison awaits him. He has been delivered unto Satan that he might learn not to blaspheme, but that God alone is the One who can forgive him.

The question this leaves us with is: "What are we doing?" We are called by Christ, called to live a Christian life in a godless world. This is not something to take lightly, something to do on weekends, a low-calorie dessert to add to life to make it more agreeable. We are soldiers in a battle, a fierce war against sin, called by Christ himself to "wage a good warfare, to hold fast to the faith, to hold to a good conscience." God's image in the eyes of others is at stake. We are to live redemptively in the midst of a fallen world.

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