

Pursue righteousness

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Date: 12 August 2018

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[0 : 0 0] verses from 1 Timothy open in front of you. As Paul comes now towards the end of his letter, Paul here in these verses is offering specific instructions to Timothy as his delegate. So in the preceding section that we looked at last week, Paul's told Timothy what he needs to do in terms of rebuking the false teachers. And now in these verses, in verses 11 to 16 that we're looking at now, he's instructing Timothy what he needs to do in his own life. So interwoven through these verses are a series of instructions and a series of motivations, mostly the instructions in the first few verses and then the motivation later on. Motivation, I guess, because in God's wisdom, Paul knows that people are apathetic. Paul knows that people need incentives. We need reasons to do things. Just saying do that is not usually enough for us. And so Paul interweaves these too. But as ever, he's not shy about giving specific instructions. He's not shy about telling people how they ought to live, about here telling Timothy what he needs to do. He gives four specific instructions right up front in those first couple of verses. And then later on in verse 14, the instruction to keep the commandment as well. So primarily, the passage, you can consider it kind of divided into two. Now that you have the instructions in verses 11 and 12, and then the incentives, the reasons in verse 13 and following. So our structure this evening is straightforward.

Number one, do these things. And number two, here's why. So firstly, what is Timothy? What is the man of God to do? In verse 11 here, we have a contrasting pair of commands, don't we? He is to flee and he is to pursue. And that pursue is then reinforced by two more, fighting and taking hold in verse 12.

Paul quite often uses this kind of contrast between fleeing and pursuing or between two different things, the negative and the negative and the positive. And certainly it seems very deliberate here, doesn't it? He says, flee these things and pursue the others. The but you that our passage here starts with, that's even more noticeable in the Greek than it is in the English, that Paul is drawing a very deliberate contrast. Timothy is to be completely unlike what has gone before. The lovers of money that we met in verses 9 and 10, while they stand in stark opposition to how Timothy needs to be. And in fact, that contrast goes back even further to contrast Timothy against anyone who teaches otherwise, chapter 6, verse 3. And so the list of virtues here in verse 11, these positive examples, the righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness, those stand as opposites of that negative list back in verse 4. Those false teachers who are conceited, who love controversy, and so on.

Now remember, this is important. It matters that Timothy do these things. Why? Because, verse 10, the craving of the love of money, through that some have wandered away from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pangs. The consequences of whether or not Timothy follows the truth, whether or not he keeps this command, are significant. They're significant for him as an individual who could be led astray, who could wander off, and they are significant for him as a teacher of others, that he might guard them against that same wandering. And so Timothy then is to flee from all of this and instead is to pursue the good. As Paul labors these points, he wants Timothy to really see how evil, how wicked the false teaching is, and how good and how lovely the truth is, how wonderful true godliness really is.

But the natural impact of seeing the depth of the evil and seeing the heights of the good, the natural consequence will be to flee wickedness and pursue godliness. These are dynamic, active verbs, aren't they? There's some effort involved in fleeing and in pursuing. The picture here isn't of a gentle stroll away from one thing and a meandering towards another. No, when we say flee, we mean the kind of fleeing that you do when you round a corner in the forest and you come face to face with a snarling bear.

[5 : 05] We mean the kind of running for your life that you do when you come face to face with your very worst nightmare. Because that is exactly what we're doing when we flee all this. We are running for our lives.

And conversely, the opposite, when we pursue righteousness, well that isn't casual either, is it? Imagine that your best friend in the world, your husband, your wife, your children, imagine they've been away for six months, away for a year. And they're coming back into the country. And you go to meet them at the airports. And you see them walking down a corridor, walking away from you. What do you do? You run after them. You run as fast as you can to catch up with them. That's the kind of enthusiasm that we're talking about here when we're commanded to pursue righteousness. That's the kind of effort, the kind of enthusiasm that Paul says we should devote to pursuing godliness. But the reality is that so often we do the opposite, don't we? So often we see the good thing that we could do. But the attraction of sin, the attraction of the reverse is so great. The lure is too much for us. And so we turn away from godliness and instead we pursue sin. And Paul is warning Timothy, warning us about the consequences of such a choice. So what is Timothy then to pursue with such gusto? What is he to do with such vigor? Paul offers here a list of six virtues at the end of verse 11. Righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. As with many of Paul's lists, this isn't intended to be an exhaustive catalogue of what is required in the Christian life. But presumably he chooses these things to highlight for a particular reason. The first pair, righteousness and godliness. This pair is focused, isn't it, on right conduct, focused on behaving the right way. Remember we've seen, as we've worked our way through this letter, we've seen that for the false teachers, the presenting issue is with their behavior. Paul has attacked them for how they're acting, for their conduct, their ethics. And in contrast to them, in contrast to these false teachers, Timothy is to pursue righteousness. Righteousness here is used in the kind of ethical sense of the demands that are laid on the person who has been justified. So Paul constantly affirms, doesn't he, that right standing before God, that justification for knowing that we have an eternal hope, that justification has a consequence. It is the free gift of God, but it expects a response to it. It expects negatively fleeing from ungodliness, and positively it expects pursuing righteousness. So righteousness here is a broad term really for all of the behavior that might be expected of a Christian. Godliness, similarly, that's a pretty broad term, and we've come across it several times through our journey in this letter.

There was that similar instruction to Timothy back in chapter 4. Timothy is to have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives tales. Rather, he is to train himself to be godly. It is this same godliness that is in view.

And a second pair follows along close behind, faith and love. These two are absolutely fundamental to Christianity, aren't they? They are points of great importance throughout Paul's teaching.

[9 : 01] Faith being both a kind of personal confidence in God through Christ Jesus, that personal confidence and a mental acceptance of the truth of the message and of Scripture as a whole. Faith then is, if you like, the radical grace of the Christian life, radical in that kind of older sense, I guess, of the root from which other things spring. Faith is the wellspring of Christian grace and virtue.

By the grace of God, it is through faith that godliness comes. And love consistently, for Paul, is a result of faith. And so too for John that we looked at a few months back, that section of 1 John that revolves around that theme of love, the love that comes from God, and the love that is indicative of a knowledge of God. So faith and love are fundamental virtues for Timothy, for all of God's people. And this list, this brief list, then closes out with endurance and gentleness. Perhaps less clear, I guess, how these two fit together. Faith and love is a natural pair, isn't it?

But endurance and gentleness. Because endurance would tend to suggest a kind of steeliness, even kind of bullishness, that is surely at odds with gentleness.

I think it's maybe helpful to see this in terms of actually both of them being forms of patience.

Endurance as a form of patience and gentleness as a form of patience.

[10 : 47] Endurance, I guess, is kind of patience with difficult situations. It's patience in the face of trying circumstances. And gentleness, well, gentleness is being patient with difficult people, isn't it?

So the two then head in the same direction. But they do also kind of correct and shape and mold one another. Because following that endurance with gentleness kind of guards against seeing the endurance as the kind of patience, the kind of persistence that is really just kind of tucking your head down and shoving your way through, regardless of what might get in your way.

No, gentleness doesn't allow that kind of endurance. So when we speak of endurance, when Paul commends endurance, he's thinking about the long slog of the Christian faith.

He's thinking about the years, perhaps, of difficulty. The years of battling with a particular sin. The years of grappling with illness and struggle.

The years of oppression from a regime that is opposed to the faith. The years of just simply putting one foot in front of another.

[12:01] The long slog of the Christian faith. That the imperative verbs, the commands here that Paul uses, they're in a form that emphasizes the ongoing nature of these actions.

That these are things that Timothy is going to have to keep doing time after time. This is what Timothy is already doing and it is what he must keep doing. Not a single action that you do once and then move on from, but rather a consistent behavior day by day.

This is the attitude that sets the pattern for Timothy's life. Friends, it is no good, is it, for us to be godly for a day here or there.

It is no good for us to have faith one day a week and then forget about it the other six. It is no good for us to only be gentle until the point where somebody pushes you and then you lash out in anger. No, gentleness needs to be the consistent experience. Righteousness needs to be part of our day to day. Godliness needs to be our consistent goal.

[13:10] In the context of this dangerous false teaching in Ephesus, Paul instructs Timothy to be gentle. Similar, isn't it, to the instruction back in chapter 5, verse 1, that Timothy is not to rebuke an older man harshly, if you remember back that far.

There's certainly a place, isn't there, for firm correction. There is a vital necessity that we stand firm for the faith. But that standing firm is characterized by gentleness, not by harshness.

And that is not always an easy balance to find. But it is what Paul commends to Timothy, and I suggest to each of us as well.

Perhaps, though, as we move into verse 12, that contrast between endurance and gentleness, or between the need to stand firm and to be gentle, perhaps that problem becomes more acute because now we have an instruction to fight.

Timothy is called to fight the good fight of the faith. The primary idea here is of disciplined struggle. And surely the struggle against temptation, the struggle against sin, and the struggle against the powers of darkness must be one element of that fight.

[14:28] But in the context of Ephesus, in the context of Timothy sent to deal with these false teachers, it seems to me that a significant part of what Paul means when he instructs Timothy to fight is that response to the false teachers.

It is the fight, the opposition, that he will encounter as he seeks to correct them. Timothy is going to have to fight against those who teach a contrary gospel.

He's going to have to fight against those who don't agree with the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, it isn't a good sign, is it, if somebody enjoys a fight?

Fighting really is an unpleasant business, isn't it? It's undignified and bloody and painful and dangerous. And the same is true of verbal controversy just as much as physical fighting.

The same is true of this kind of fight for truth and goodness and godliness that Timothy is to strive for. In some ways, that fight should be distasteful to us.

[15:33] There is something sick about those who relish combat, whether physical or verbal. We'll know people who seem only too eager to get into a debate or worse, an argument.

No, that ought not to be the case. But it is still true that this is described as the good fight. This is a battle that has to be fought, whether you like it or not, because truth is precious, even sacred.

But being truth from God, it cannot be neglected without affronting God himself. The truth is essential for the health of the church, essential for the growth of God's church.

So wherever that truth, that once revealed faith is being imperiled, is being opposed by false teachers, wherever that is happening, defense of that truth is a painful necessity.

So even that gentleness that we are to pursue is not incompatible with fighting the good fight of the faith. That brings us down to Paul's fourth instruction, to take hold of the eternal life to which he has been called.

[16:56] If you think about that instruction for a moment, for Timothy to take hold of the eternal life to which he has been called, I think if you consider that, there will probably be a few questions that might naturally come to mind.

The first, I guess, is how can Timothy be told now, as he is living in Ephesus, how can he be told now to take hold of eternal life?

Is that not rather something that he will do in the future after he dies? Is it not a somewhat odd instruction? However, the reason it strikes us, or strikes me at least, as an odd instruction, is because we don't tend to think of eternal life in the fullest of senses in which the Bible uses that term.

We tend to think of eternal life as something that happens after we die, and we tend to think of it in terms of duration. We think of it in terms of how long it lasts.

It's there in the name eternal, as in it lasts forever. But actually, that isn't the whole picture of what eternal life means. It does last forever, sure, but as the New Testament uses that term eternal life, the emphasis isn't so much on the duration as it is on the quality of that life.

[18:18] The emphasis is on the kind of life that we will live for all time, rather than the fact that we will live it. So, eternal life means the life of the age to come, means the life of the age that Jesus has inaugurated.

And because that age has been inaugurated, because the kingdom of God has in some senses already come, as Paul writes this letter, because it has already come today, then that eternal life is something that Timothy can experience already as he lives there in Ephesus, and something that we can experience today.

Jesus defined this kind of life in terms of knowing him and knowing the Father. And therefore, it is a present possession as well as a future hope.

Don't mishear me, there is still a future element to it, but there is also the beginning of eternal life right here and now in the kingdom of God.

Second question, isn't it a bit strange for a Christian leader, somebody like Timothy, somebody who is a respected apostolic delegate, isn't it pretty odd for that kind of man to be told to take hold of eternal life?

[19:46] I mean, he's been a Christian for many years, hasn't he? Surely he has already been born again. Surely he has already received eternal life some time ago, if it is already an inaugurated thing.

So why does Paul tell him to grasp hold of what surely he already has? I think the answer there, I think the answer lies in the fact that it's possible for me to have something and not really use it, not really do anything with it, not really embrace it, not really enjoy it.

I can leave it sitting there over on a shelf, happy that I've got it, but it doesn't really have any impact on what I do day to day. But the word that Paul uses here, instructing Timothy to take hold of the eternal life, one of the nuances of that word is taking hold of something specifically in order to make it your own.

Something that is not fully yours or not yours at all yet, taking it and grasping it and making it mine. And so yes, Timothy has already received eternal life, but Paul can still urge him to seize it, to grasp that eternal life, to make that life completely his own.

He can instruct Timothy to enjoy eternal life. He can encourage Timothy to live eternal life to the full. And the sad reality is that today there are too many Christians for whom this kind of half possession, this kind of theoretical out there on a shelf somewhere possession is their reality.

[21:34] Too many people who, yes, have trusted Jesus as Savior and Lord, but who haven't, as it were, thrown themselves into it, haven't embraced it as a real day-to-day reality, haven't allowed it to impact their whole lives, haven't embraced that fullness of life.

And so Paul charges Timothy to seize hold of eternal life to make the very most of it. And thus, in these opening verses, we have what John starts commenting on these verses, what he describes as a threefold charge to Timothy.

There is the ethical charge to flee from evil and pursue goodness. There is the doctrinal charge to turn from error and to fight for the truth.

And there is the experiential charge to lay hold of the life that he has already received. And these three elements are all vital to the healthy Christian life are all essential to Timothy as he pursues godliness, as he seeks to be the man of God.

These things are essential to anyone who would wish to be described as the man of God or the woman of God. And the three elements, the ethical, the doctrinal, and the experiential, well, they constitute a kind of healthy balance, don't they?

[22 : 59] Because there's a danger in those who fight for truth but neglect godliness. Well, such a man would not be called gentle, would they?

Such a woman would not be pursuing righteousness. Or others might pursue holiness but without being concerned for the truth. How then will they know what is true holiness?

How will they preserve others from falling into error if they have no concern for the truth? And yet others might disregard both doctrine and ethics in their search for that religious experience.

But by searching for the experience without the truth, without true holiness, you can never hope to encounter the true and living God. And so the man or woman of God combines these elements, the ethical, the doctrinal, and the experiential, combines them into an elegant harmony.

Why? Why do these things? Second and probably more briefly, Paul spends most of the rest of this section explaining why these things ought to be.

[24 : 19] He spends his time offering reasons and incentives for Timothy to behave in the way that he has described. He offers God as creator, giver, and sustainer of life.

He offers the comparison with Christ Jesus who made his good confession before Pilate and after whom the man of God is to pattern himself. He reminds Timothy of the hope of the future return of the Lord Jesus which God will bring about.

We don't have time to unpack all of those. I want to spend a few moments considering the final piece of the picture, the last reason for Timothy to pursue these things.

And this comes in the second half of verse 15 and on through into verse 16. Paul here in these verses describes the kind of God who Timothy worships.

He describes the nature of the God who we are called to worship. And as Paul breaks out into this doxology as it's called, this hymn of praise, this song giving glory to God, as he breaks out into this, he affirms four key truths about God's sovereign power.

[25 : 35] He reminds Timothy that God is absolutely supreme, that God is completely beyond human control or manipulation for at least four reasons that he gives here.

Firstly, God is beyond the manipulation of sinful humanity. God is supreme over all because he is the only ruler, the king of kings and lord of lords.

Now that means supreme over all, not because other powers and authorities don't exist. They do, both human authorities and supernatural powers.

Now when he says God is the only ruler, that's in the sense that all other rulers, all other authorities, whether human, whether supernatural, all of them receive their right to rule, receive their authority, receive their power from him.

He is the only one who has the inherent right to rule, to reign, to be supreme. He is therefore the king who sits above all other kings.

[26 : 43] He is the lord supreme over all other lords. And secondly, God alone is immortal. Now that doesn't mean that we don't or that we can't survive death, as we've already seen.

Eternal life is a real hope for the Christian. Again, God is alone, immortal, in a similar way to being the only ruler, in that all other life is received from his hand.

See, our eternal life as Christian believers doesn't come from anything in us, does it? It isn't inherent to human beings to live forever. No, our eternal life is received as a gift, is received as an endowment.

But Christ's immortality, the immortality of God, it is an innate property. It is part of the very fundamental nature of divinity.

It is part of what it is to be God, that he has life in himself, as John chapter five puts it. He is the only immortal God.

[27 : 52] Thirdly, there's a reminder for Timothy that God is beyond that sense of human manipulation, that God is not subject to the control of anyone else because we can't get to him.

He dwells, Paul says, in unapproachable light. And what that means is, that means that darkness, in any shape or form, it means that falsehood and evil and anyone of impure heart cannot even enter his presence, let alone hope to attack him, let alone hope to overcome him.

God dwells in unapproachable light. He is sovereign without threat to him. And fourthly and finally, Timothy is to be encouraged that God is invisible, that God is beyond human sight and beyond our comprehension, that no one has seen him, no one can see God and live.

All that human eyes have been permitted to see is his glory, is his back, not his face, or have seen the image of the invisible God in the incarnate sun.

Thus, because God is by nature invisible, we can only know God in so far as he has been pleased to make himself known.

[29 : 17] We can only know God because he has chosen to reveal himself to us. He has chosen to reveal himself through the prophets, down through the Old Testament, and chosen to reveal himself supremely in the person of his son.

So we praise God that as we were thinking about this morning, he has indeed made himself known.

Not completely, not fully, we do not know everything about God.

And yet we do know him truly. Praise God. And given this nature of God that he has described, God the blessed and only ruler, the king of kings and lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see, given that that kind of God is who Timothy is seeking to serve, well that kind of God is worthy of all worship, is worthy of our praise.

That kind of God is worth fighting the good fight for. That kind of God is worth pursuing. That kind of God is able to protect and to preserve and to sustain his people.

Timothy, the man of God, we, the men and women of God, we serve this God who is truly powerful.

And so, however intense the opposition, whether that opposition comes from within the church as in Ephesus or from outside it, however powerful the opponents that we find ourselves facing might be, we serve the one who is king of kings and lord of lords.

[31 : 02] We serve the one whose transcendent glory is absolutely overwhelming, before whom no one can stand. Amen.