



A Study of 1st & 2nd Timothy

1st Timothy 1:18-20 Fighting the Good Fight

I am reading from 1st Timothy chapter one, verses eighteen through twenty. If you're using one of the pew Bibles, the passage is located on page 991...1st Timothy 1:18-20.

This is what God's Word says:

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

Let's pray.

Father, we come to you this morning confessing to you our great need. Father we need and we desire that the Holy Spirit come now and take the things of Christ and make them real to our hearts...to come and take the written word and as its true author and therefore its infallible teacher to instruct us in the truth of your

Son. Open the book we pray to see what you have accomplished on our behalf, in Christ, in whose name, we pray, Amen.

It was one of those truly remarkable moments in history...one of those moments that every historian worth his salt wishes he had witnessed...wishes he had been there to actually see happen...to actually see firsthand.

The previous day the Roman Catholic examiners *had* had Martin Luther right where they wanted him. They had asked him about his books...his many books...as to whether he himself had actually written them.

He admitted that he had.

They had asked whether he was willing to recant for having written them.

He had sort of mumbled out an answer...they were not all books of the same kind he said...some of them were not controversial...even his bitterest enemies agreed with that. Some were written against private persons...and in a sense were not really the concern of the church at large. And then some were...well...some of them were controversial...he admitted that...some did strike at the very heart of Catholic doctrine and practice...but couldn't they just show him from the Scripture where he had things gummed up. If they would just show him why he was wrong or how he was wrong, he would gladly admit his error and burn his books himself.

"No," they boomed back. They were not going to show him where he was wrong. The time for debate was past. Only one question really remained, **"Was he or was**

he not going to recant of writing his books? Was he or was he not going to admit that he had been wrong about everything...about indulgences, about the Pope, about the sacraments, about...about justification by faith...the whole ball of wax?"

Luther had quietly in a rather sheepish voice asked whether he might have an additional day to think about and form his answer.

They had him right where they wanted him.

They thought they saw in Luther a man beat down with fear...beat down by the collective weight and majesty and power of the Holy See. They thought they saw in Luther a man seriously contemplating just what it might feel like to be burned alive. They thought they saw him wavering. They thought they saw a chink in his armor and decided they could just as well appear to be magnanimous...to show him some mercy.

They granted him the rest of the day and night to consider his answer. They gave him their pledge of safety.

The sun went down and then it came up again.

The next day at the appointed hour surrounded by friends and foes alike Luther walked slowly and deliberately...into the jaws of the lion.

Like I said earlier, it was one of those defining moments in history that every historian worth his salt wishes he had been there to see with his own eyes and to hear with his own ears.

They started right back in where they had left off, **“Martin Luther do you or do you not recant of these books you have written?”**

To which Luther replied, **“Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe both the Pope and Councils alone have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound up by the word of God: I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience. Here I stand. I can no other. God help me! Amen.”¹**

It was Luther’s way of saying he had no intention of burning his books.

Later on, the world would learn that during the night before Luther had struggled to form his answer...that he had been shaken to the core...but that he had settled in the end in deep down in his soul to stick with the faith of the Scriptures...to stick with the gospel...to stick with the doctrine of justification by faith alone, in Christ alone. The world learned that Luther’s conscience had been bound not by magisterium of the church but rather by the Word of God.

It was one of those great defining moments not just in the history of the church but in the history of the world.

But there is one other thing most people don't know and I would like us to think about it for just a moment before we turn to look at 1st Timothy.

When the famous Czech reformer John Huss (Huss means "goose" in Czech) was burned alive at the stake in 1417 he was reported to have prophesied, **“Today you will roast a lean goose, but hundred years from now you will hear a swan sing, whom you will leave unroasted and no trap or net will catch him for you.”**

There is the very real possibility that Luther may have believed that what John Huss said before being burned alive was actually a prophecy regarding him (Luther's family crest you see had a swan at its center). I know with certainty that later on Luther thought the prophecy was about him because he says as much.² I am not quite sure that he had already come to that conclusion there at Worms or not but if he had...think about how that might have helped strengthen him and might have turned him from a man of mush into a man of steel. If that is true, it would mean that there were three things working in concert to prop him up...the testimony and clearly taught faith of Scripture, his own conscience bound up by the Spirit's application of the Word of God, and then this, this extraordinary prophecy that he would *not* be burned alive.

Now I wanted to tell Luther's story again because I never get tired of hearing it and because in a way it contains the exact same sequence of thought contained in 1st Timothy 1:18-20.

It really is a remarkable parallel.

Remember now that Luther made his decision to stand firm for the gospel on the basis of the faith taught by the Word of God, on the basis of his conscience bound up by the Word of God, and on the basis that he believed he had perhaps been referred to in a prophecy made by John Huss.

All three of those elements come up in these three verses here at the end of 1st Timothy.

Still, there is one more thing we need to discuss before we turn to look at 1st Timothy 1:18-20.

The verses come up at the end of a digression, and before we move on I think perhaps I should make sure that everyone understands what a digression *is*.

Now I make my living as a schoolteacher and I can tell you for a fact students know what a digression is and often try to cause them to happen. A digression occurs when the speaker or writer seems to get off track as to what they are saying...students sometimes they are called **"rabbit trails."**

Students like to try to cause teachers to wander off to some personal story or account just to escape having the routine of having to do a difficult assignment or task.

"Mr. Browning was school this hard when you were a student back there with Lincoln in that log cabin?"

or...

“Mr. Browning did you see Giancarlo Stanton get hit by that pitch last night?”

Parents too sometimes get lured into digressions when they are administering discipline, **“But mom...dad, didn’t you ever do something stupid?”**

What the child wants is for the parent to take off on some tangent...to go off on some rabbit trail and forget the matter at hand.

Now digressions do occur in the Bible. Of course, when they occur in the Bible they are not rabbit trails at all. But sometimes authors like Paul do leave the subject at hand because a word or idea has invariably led them off to another topic. That’s happens in 1st Timothy 1:1-18 and I want to take a minute and show it to you.

That is, I want to show you the digression in the text. Look at 1st Timothy 1:3.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 1:3**...As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine,

Now look down to verse eighteen.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 1:18**...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,

You see what I mean.

Verse eighteen picks right back up at where verse three left off. It is almost as if Paul is saying, **“Now where was I...oh yeah...like I said...This charge I entrust to you.”**

So then where’s the digression? Well the digression is everything between verses three and eighteen.

And if you have been here the last few weeks you’ll know that in those verses Paul talks about two things. First, he talks about the false teachers that turned from rightly teaching the law to teaching all manner of wild speculative nonsense. And then he turns to his own example of remaining a faithful teacher even though he started off a blasphemer and persecutor of the church.

You’ll remember how he explained the extraordinary nature his own faithful ministry in verses twelve through fourteen.

ESV 1 Timothy 1:12...I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

So what is Paul up to in verse eighteen through twenty as he comes out of his digression?

I think he is coming back to his initial point and is putting pressure on Timothy to make a decision...and not just any decision. Rather, I think he is pressuring Timothy to make a decision to stand on the side of right doctrine and a conscience

bound up in the Word of God and of the prophecies made about him at his ordination.

Let me put it this way. I think Paul is saying, **“Alright Timothy, you’ve seen the way the false teachers have gone, and you seen my decision that stay in the stuff, now what are you going to do? Just in case you don’t know...let me remind you of the charge I have entrusted to you.”**

Alright then, with the mother of all introductions out of the way let’s put in at verse eighteen.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 1:18**...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 returns to his charge to Timothy to guard the gospel entrusted to him there in Ephesus. What that means, of course, linking back to verses three and four is that he is to stand against the false teachers that are troubling the church...those men that are using the law in the wrong way turning it into something speculative and allegorical rather than letting it do its thing in exposing sin for what it is.

Now the one really fascinating part of Paul’s charge is that he ties it not just back to his relationship to Timothy...which he certainly does do in verse eighteen when he refers to Timothy as his son...but also to certain prophecies made about Timothy sometime in the past. The reason that is so fascinating is because there is no way to know exactly when those prophecies were made or exactly what they said about Timothy. Of course, Paul knew what he meant and Timothy would have known exactly what Paul meant. But we have no way of knowing and that

tends to make us anxious simply because we don't know the details. But we shouldn't be. The overall idea is clear enough.

J.N.D. Kelly writes this:

Paul is thinking about some occasion, or perhaps occasions, still vivid in Timothy's memory, on which prophets spoke at length³ on the young's man's fitness for God's service. This may have taken place at his ordination, which we are told was accompanied by prophetic activity, or his appointment at Ephesus, or in the course of some other episode in his career.⁴

Calvin adds this:

We conclude from these words that several prophecies were *spoken regarding Timothy*, in order to recommend him to the Church. *Perhaps* being still a young man, he may have been *disregarded* because of his age... Besides, God seems to have appointed him to a number of difficult undertakings; for he was not one of the ordinary rank of ministers, but approached very closely to that of the apostles, and frequently occupied the place of Paul during his absence. It *may have been* necessary *therefore* that he should receive an extraordinary testimony, in order to make it manifest that it was not conferred on him at random by men, but that he was chosen by God himself.⁵

That seems to make sense, but it is also more than what the text says. We know there were prophecies about Timothy. The apostolic age was still going on and God's revelation wasn't yet closed. I also think it makes good sense to assume that whatever it was that happened in terms of prophecies occurred at his ordination to the ministry. I say that because of 1st Timothy 4:14 where it says:

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 4:14**...Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.

If these prophecies occurred at his ordination, they would have been spoken to Timothy or about Timothy and would have been a kind of confirmation to his giftedness and call from God. What is sure is that Paul believed that these prophecies that were spoken were meant to strengthen Timothy. That is why he adds at the end of verse eighteen...

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 1:18**...that by them you may wage the good warfare,

So then, Timothy on the basis of his relationship to Paul and on the basis of these prophecies was to wage the good warfare against these false teachers. The term “wage warfare” is metaphorical, of course. He was not to take a sword or spear or even a whip to these false teachers. Rather, he was to stand toe to toe against them and correct them by the Word of God.

And you know, in one sense, things haven't changed all that much. My brother elders, we are called to do the same. But...it isn't the duty of the elders alone to contend for the faith. It is the duty of every member of our church to contend both for the peace and the purity of the church. That means that we all have an obligation to seek to know the truth...and to contend for the truth. It is true that the pastors and elders of our church here at Grace have a greater responsibility before God because of their calling but it is not true that the regular lay people in the pew have no responsibility. In fact, if you are a member here you have sworn an oath before God to protect and defend the purity and peace of the church. Now that doesn't mean that we should try to bind men and women's consciences with every single minute detail of Presbyterian doctrine. But it does mean that we ever want to instruct, and teach according to what the Bible teaches, and it means we ought to be willing to defend to the death the truth of the gospel.

Let me just give one example of what I mean.

Not too many months back, we had young man attend our church for awhile who had been a Jehovah's Witness for a long time. He liked attending our church and I wanted to encourage him to continue in his quest to gain the truth so I took him out to supper one night and shared the gospel with him. He listened intently for a long time and then to me, **"I see what you mean but I can't accept the idea that Jesus was God incarnate...that he was God come in the flesh to redeem men from their sin. And I don't think I'll ever believe that. Do you think your church might be willing to give a bit on this one point and let me become a member without holding or professing that particular belief?"**

I remember how disappointed he was when I told him, **"You know that is not something we can concede...because really it is central to the gospel. The deity of Jesus is central both to the gospel and to a proper understanding of to the Trinity itself. Our church won't concede the issue, and it won't soften its view and I think...no, I know, there are a whole host of us that would rather die than let that happen."**

Paul's charge to Timothy is crafted along the same lines. You see Paul is charging Timothy to hold the line against these false teachers and he is charging him to do that in light of the prophecies made about him because the very safety of the gospel is at stake. In verse 19, Paul adds this:

ESV 1 Timothy 1:19...holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith,

Now for you to see the full thrust of what he is saying it is important to read verse 19 in connection with verse 18.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 1:18**...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, ¹⁹ holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith,

Now what we're interested in are the first six words of verse nineteen.

I say that because they finish off Paul's sentence in verse eighteen.

Paul's point then goes something like this, **"On the basis of our relationship and of the prophecies made about you I want you to wage the good fight against these false teachers and I want you to do so by holding both the faith and a good conscience."**

"The faith" refers, I think, to proper doctrine...the doctrine handed down by the apostles. I say that even though the word **"the"** is not actually in the Greek text in front of the word faith. I still think that the reference is to **"the common faith"**...the **"received faith of the apostles."** I say because the **"the"** is included the second time the word is used at the end of the verse.

The phrase a **"good conscience"** refers to the kind of life that springs from proper doctrine.

The same idea comes up in 1st Timothy 4:16.

ESV 1 Timothy 4:16...Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

We have already seen earlier in chapter one that departing from proper doctrine leads to a flagrantly sinful life. Paul said as much back 1st Timothy 1:9-10.

ESV 1 Timothy 1:9...We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers,¹⁰ for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers-- and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine¹¹ that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God...

You notice the last part of verse 10 where it says, **“and whatever else”**...by which it means whatever other sin is contrary not to good practice but rather to sound doctrine. *Paul’s point is that bad doctrine leads to bad practice.*

So what Paul is saying is this, **“Fight the good fight by remembering my affection for you and the prophecies made about yourself and by remembering the apostolic teaching you received which you will, of course, live out in the way you deal with others.”**

Philip Ryken writes this:

These two virtues—faith and a good conscience—are joined together three times in 1 Timothy (1:5; 1:19; 3:9; & 4:16). They belong together. If a water molecule loses its oxygen atom, or a hydrogen atom, it is no longer water. In the same way, if a Christian loses faith or conscience, he or she is no longer living as a Christian.

Faith and conscience go together in several ways. Obviously, false doctrine leads to moral failure; wrong views about God's Word lead inevitably to wrong

practices. But the reverse is also true: a bad conscience often leads to bad doctrine. Calvin went so far as to say that "**a bad conscience is the mother of all heresies.**"⁶

Paul then adds that those who have rejected sound doctrine and living in light of sound doctrine have gone on to make shipwreck of the faith. What he means, of course, is that they loved sin and the pleasures so much that they were willing to alter sound doctrine so that they could justify their way of life. Gordon Fee is quite right in pointing out that the text actually says they shipwrecked "**the faith**" not "**their faith.**"⁷ What that means is that they were willing to take the historic, apostolic faith and run it aground in order to carry on with their lives. What he means is that they made shipwreck of the faith by rejecting a good conscience.

Now just who were these people that had made shipwreck of the faith?

Paul tells us in verse twenty.

ESV 1 Timothy 1:20...among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

The two characters that have rejected a good conscience and have wound up making shipwreck of the faith are Hymenaeus and Alexander. There are more than just those two...but those are two that everyone knows about. The strange thing is that we don't know very much about either one. Of the two only Hymenaeus is mentioned again in Paul's letters to Timothy. He is mentioned in 2nd Timothy where we find out just what kind of mischief he was up to.

ESV 2 Timothy 2:17...and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus,¹⁸ who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.

Alexander on the other hand was a common name in the ancient world. There is an Alexander the coppersmith mentioned again in Paul's *2nd Letter to Timothy* but there is no reason to think this Alexander and that Alexander are the same.⁸ I think it is implied that the Alexander in view here was at least once upon a time a part of the church.⁹

What is clear is that Paul has handed both Hymanaeus and Alexander over to Satan not that they might be eternally damned but that they might be taught not to blaspheme.

The question is, **"What does that mean?"**

It means that they were excommunicated...turned out of the church.¹⁰ The phrase is only used one other time in Paul's writing and that occurs in 1 Corinthians 5 where one of the men in the church was having an adulterous relationship with his stepmother.

Paul tells the Corinthians to do to him what the Jews used to do to yeast each year at Passover...get rid of it. He tells them to, **"Purge the evil person from among you."**¹¹

Now I should add that this step is the last step in the church's arsenal to reclaim sinners. You will notice that the last part of verse twenty says, **"That they may be taught not to blaspheme."** The goal of discipline in the church is not to punish believers but rather to restore believers. Excommunication only occurs as a last resort and only when a person becomes contumacious...which means they have

dug in their heels and have refused to repent of either their scandalous life or doctrines.

Believe it or not that sometimes happens. Sometimes believers love their sin so much that they are not willing to part with it.

Excommunication then is designed to restore the contumacious sinner and at the same time protect the gospel. In the case of Ephesus, Paul has already purged Hymanaeus and Alexander and expects Timothy to take on the other false teachers that remain.

So what then is the application from the last three verses for us?

I think there are a couple of things.

We need to be vigilant...not suspicious...not hyper-critical...but vigilant. I don't think we ought to be so picky that we analyze and evaluate every nuance of every single word or action of the brothers and sisters around us. We don't need to be trying to read things into their words or actions. We need always to be loving. But when grievous doctrinal errors or moral offences occur we need to speak the truth in love not with an intention to beat someone down or break their heart...but with intent to restore that person and protect both the gospel and the body of Christ. It is a difficult thing to get right. I have sometimes crushed without mercy those I love by being too critical...just as I have sometimes let things go too long with speaking up. Still, the safety of the treasure of the gospel is the thing...it is the thing with which we have been entrusted and we are compelled to guard it. In one sense each of us has an obligation to see that the gospel is protected and the

weapons we hold in our hands for the battle are our great common faith and a good conscience.

As I wrote that last line, I stopped and thought to myself, **“I wish we had a prophetic word spoken about us...you know one like Timothy or Luther. I wish we had that in addition to faith and a good conscience to strengthen us in our guardianship of the gospel.”** And then it occurred that we do in a way. We have it in the prayer of our Lord in John 17. Listen to the words of our Lord’s prayer on our behalf.

^{ESV} **John 17:18**...As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.
¹⁹ And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.
²⁰ "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,
²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

So there you have it. We are to guard the good treasure entrusted to us strengthened by the prayer of our Lord and we are to do using the weapons we have been given...the apostolic faith handed down to us and a good conscience.

Let’s pray.

¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church; Modern History: The German Reformation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1910; reprint 1984), 300-6.

² M. Luther, (1999, c1960). *Vol. 34: Luther’s Works, Vol. 34 : Career of the Reformer IV* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Vol. 34, Page 103-104). Philadelphia: Fortress Press. Taken from...*Dr. Martin Luther’s Commentary on the Alleged Imperial Edict Promulgated in the Year 1531 After the Imperial Diet of the Year 1530*

³ Kelly uses the word “expatiated.” I have opted for “spoke at length.”

⁴ J.N.D. Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1960), 57.

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on 1st Timothy*. Chapter 1:18. I've altered Calvin's wording a bit but not the sense. I have tried to show my changes by means of italics.

⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy (REC)*. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P& R Publishing, 2001), 52. The Calvin quote is from his commentary on 1st Timothy and goes like this," A bad conscience is, therefore, the mother of all heresies; and we see that a vast number of persons, who had not sincerely and honestly embraced the faith, are hurried along, like brute beasts, into the reveries of the Epicureans, so that their hypocrisy is exposed And not only so, but contempt of God is universally prevalent, and the licentious and disgraceful lives of almost all ranks show that there is either none at all, or the smallest possible portion of integrity in the world; so that there is very great reason to fear lest the light which had been kindled may be speedily extinguished, and God may leave the pure understanding of the gospel to be possessed by very few.

⁷ R. Kent Hughes, and Bryan Chapell, *1-2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit (PTW)*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 56.

⁸ **ESV 2 Timothy 4:14**...Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds.

⁹ I.H. Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*. (ICC) (London: T&T Clark, 1999). 412-13.

¹⁰ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 160.

¹¹ **ESV 1 Corinthians 5:13**.