**The good fight** 9/6/24 dkm

Read: 1Corinthians 5, 1Timothy 1

Text: 1Timothy 1:18-20

Psalms: 18:29-36, 144:1-8, 4, 72old

On 25 April our nation stopped to remember those who fought to stop our nation being invaded by enemies. Almost all those soldiers have now died, many in the war itself and others, like my father, in old age. I have never been called upon to fight for our nation, but I have been called upon to fight for the kingdom of God. And you, as a believer in Jesus Christ, have been called upon to do the same.

Do you know that you are in a war, a spiritual war? Who is our enemy in this ‘war of faith’? What weapons do we have, and how do we train for this battle? These questions the apostle Paul answers in this passage, and other passages of Scripture. Perhaps the most detailed description of this war that every believer is engaged in is found in Ephesians 6. In this chapter Paul tells us to take up the whole armour of God’, after telling us that our fight is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual enemies, against the devil and his schemes.

The devil attacked Jesus as he began his ministry, but Jesus was ready for him. Are you ready for Satan’s attack? I trust you believe in the reality of Satan and know something of his schemes! Can you recognise his voice when you hear it? Do you listen to him as Eve did, or do you say with Jesus, ‘Get behind me Satan’ (Mark 8:33)? If you have never heard the voice of Satan, it means you are no threat to him, or that you are not watching and listening carefully. Please do not say, ‘I am above and beyond temptation’- remember Jesus was tempted.

‘Know your enemy’ is the first principle of warfare; know who he is and know his tactics. The enemy of course, prefers not to be identified. The enemy tries to infiltrate your stronghold, either physically or with propaganda. The latter is easier and can be more effective. The church at Ephesus was under attack from within. The attack was coming from false teaching. Paul commanded his young lieutenant called Timothy to wage the good warfare (1:18).

Paul, like Jesus, felt the wrath of Rome at times, but the enemy in his focus most of the time was false teachers in the church. These men were, more often than not, from a Jewish background, men who failed to turn away from rituals like circumcision, and law-keeping, when they joined the church. They failed to embrace the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The false teachers were focused on Jewish fables and other man-made rules and regulations, having lost focus on the truth and grace of the gospel preached by Paul. Personal faith and a good conscience are key to fighting the good fight. Our first subheading is, ‘Fight the good fight’, our second, ‘Faith and a good conscience’, and our third, ‘Failure of two men’.

**1.Fight the good fight**

In this his first letter to his ‘son in the faith’ Timothy, Paul urges him to stay on in Ephesus despite the undermining and threats from false teachers. Here in verse 18 this ‘urging’ becomes a ‘command’ or ‘charge’ as the apostle starts thinking in terms of war. Timothy the soldier is being given a commission or duty to carry out (2Tim 2:3). Not that this commission was something new. Paul reminds Timothy of a commission he was given previously, presumably when Paul was in Lystra and wanted Timothy on his mission team (Acts 16:3).

In the apostolic age the Lord sometimes communicated his will through the gift of prophecy (e.g. Acts 21:11). The Holy Spirit is given to all believers, and we now have the inspired and infallible words of the NT in our Bible, words which guide us in discerning the will of God. As Paul commanded Timothy to remain in Ephesus and fight this spiritual battle, he reminded him of the commission he was given by prophecy, by prayer and by the laying on of hands (1:18, 4:14, Acts 6:6). I recall the commissioning service we had when we were sent as missionaries to India. We did not have a prophet speak, but after much prayer and counsel from fellow believers, we reached this point of being set apart or commissioned as missionaries. We similarly commission elders and deacons in the church, and maybe should commission people for other ministries.

I often recalled our commissioning as missionaries during our time in India, especially during the first year when I felt like giving up and going back home. But in recalling our commissioning, the Lord gave strength to remain; besides, what would they say if we turned up back in our home church! I suppose in military terms we would have been labelled deserters. Thankfully, Timothy was not a deserter.

Timothy was being given an order by the apostle, but Paul still refers to him as his son (1:18). He reminds Timothy of the prophecy and the prayers of those who commissioned him as he gave this instruction to fight the good fight within the church at Ephesus. We must stand our ground by standing in the truth of the gospel and in the power of the Lord. Wearing the armour of God, we will ‘be able to stand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand’ (Eph 6:13).

As in any battle, there will times to advance and times to hold the ground, but never a time to give up. Knowing that the Lord is with us, we will not fear the weapons of this world that Satan takes up. The great Reformer and martyr, Hugh Latimer, preached justification by grace alone through faith alone, but also preached that a justified man will show it in the way he lives. His preaching offended other preachers and offended King Henry. When the King demanded an apology in his next sermon, Latimer preached the same sermon with more vigour!

The ‘good fight’ is the fight for good, the fight for the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. False teachers in the church were preaching another gospel, a gospel of fables and the commands of men. They were preaching a gospel that had no power to save anyone! It was not physical lives but spiritual lives that were at stake in this war. It was precious souls, not the bodies of men, women and children that were at stake. This was the reason Paul commanded Timothy to fight the good fight. ‘Woe unto him who causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin’ (Mat 18:6). The Reformers fought the same battle, and we are fighting the same battle, the battle for truth, the battle for the gospel of grace set forth in the doctrines of grace as found in Holy Scripture.

**2.Faith and a good conscience**

In the good fight it is necessary, absolutely necessary, to have faith and a good conscience (1:19). The armour of God referred to in Ephesians 6 includes truth as your belt, righteousness as your breastplate, and the shield of faith. The devil is pictured as hurling arrows; he looks for a chink in our armour. If our shield has become weakened by false teaching that undermines our faith, or if our breastplate has been torn by unrighteous conduct, we will be vulnerable.

Faith is what we believe. Faith is the gift of God. Faith is a heart changed from unbelief to belief by the power of God. It is not enough to know about God; we must know God by faith. That said, we must know about God if we know him and believe in him. Doctrine or teaching is important. To be a sailor, a sailor who survives, you must know about ships and about the weather. If your knowledge or information is false, your life will be in danger. Too many Christians are drifting rather than carefully and prayerfully sailing the boat that is their life. Is it any wonder they get blown off course and are in danger of perishing. We must be studying our Bible and praying every day.

Right doctrine is fundamental to fighting the good fight. Doctrine of course, determines conduct. We are what we believe- not what we eat! Faith must be accompanied by a good conscience. Faith without a good conscience leads to immorality; a good conscience without faith is mere moralism. The Christian must hold on to both, which is why Paul writes, ‘Having faith and a good conscience’ (1:19).

Paul often spoke of having a good or pure conscience (3:9, 2Tim 1:3, Acts 23:1, Rom 9:1). Our conscience tells us what is right and what is wrong; it is our moral compass, as they say. This compass is corrupted by sin. When our heart is changed by grace through faith in Jesus Christ our conscience is enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Faith will affect our conscience, and through our conscience will affect the way we live. Do not sin against your conscience, that inner voice coming from your heart. If your conscience has been enlightened by the Holy Spirit, then listen to it. ‘Do not sear your conscience as with a hot iron’ (4:2). Other people, as agents of Satan, may tell you not to listen to your conscience, but the Bible tells you to listen to your conscience and live according to the commands of Christ.

**3.Failure of two men**

In the church at Ephesus were two men who had failed concerning faith and a good conscience; grammatically their ‘rejection’ refers to a good conscience. Paul picks up on his condemnation of the false teachers who had strayed and turned aside to idle talk (1:6), naming two individuals. Hymenaeus and Alexander were probably the ringleaders in this rebellion within the church (1:20). Hymenaeus is mentioned again in 2Timothy 2:17 because he taught the resurrection as already past. Paul dealt with a similar false teaching in the Thessalonian church years earlier (2Thess 2:2). It must have been a popular ‘false teaching’; the second coming of Jesus still attracts a lot of speculation and false teaching.

False teachers by nature never agree. In Ephesus some taught one thing and others taught something else, with the result that they ‘overthrew the faith of some’ (2Tim 2:18). You will find that liberal scholars, as well as Pentecostal preachers, rarely agree with one another in doctrine. How thankful we are to have our confession of faith as a subordinate standard regarding the doctrines of grace. Not that we escape false teachers or unconscionable conduct. You will find that false teaching affects the conscience, leading to immoral conduct- not just sexual immorality but pride, selfishness, deceit and slander.

By rejecting ‘the faith’, these two men had shipwrecked their own faith (1:20). Teaching false doctrine means one believes in it -or soon will- such that true or sound doctrine is stifled. Picturing life as a sailor rather than a soldier, Paul speaks of these men being shipwrecked. If the light of the lighthouse is snuffed out, the ship will soon end up on the rocks. Or we might say these men had lost their rudder and were headed into the trap of the devil.

Paul says that he had delivered Hymenaeus and Alexander to Satan, ‘to be taught not to blaspheme’ (1:20 NIV). In a sense they were sailing in the hands of Satan anyway, but Paul wants Timothy and the church to formally discipline and excommunicate these men. It is interesting that he says the same thing with regard to the incestuous man in the church at Corinth (1Cor 5:5). Discipline was exercised towards these false teachers and the sexual offender alike.

What did this discipline, this apostolic as well as church discipline, involve? We can be sure it was not imposed without warning and the call to repent, just as we can be sure, and are told, it was for the purpose of repentance that discipline was imposed. The two men must learn not to blaspheme, not to teach false things regarding our Lord Jesus Christ and gospel. The resurrection will occur when Christ returns, and this had not yet happened. Those who teach a secret coming of Jesus without a general resurrection, beware!

Handing over to Satan was excommunication or putting out of the fellowship. The church where the gospel is preached and where people love the commands of Christ, and love one another, is a place of shelter from Satan and his agents. Being put out of the church or excommunicated means one is back in the realm of Satan to be abused as he sees fit.

Such discipline by the church is an act of love. The rebellious person is being taught to stop their rebellion and repent. When they do so, they will be welcomed back into the church and the care of Christ. Discipline is never easy to accept but it is, or should be, a sign of love. The Lord disciplines those whom he loves (Heb 12:6). The church must be careful and prayerful in exercising discipline, but it must not be neglectful. Discipline is an important ministry within the church of Jesus Christ.