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1 Timothy 6:11-21

Fifteenth Message

Brian Morgan

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FIGHTING FOR LIFE

SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH

In his book *The Greatest Generation*, Tom Brokaw begins with a quote from Franklin Delano Roosevelt: “*This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny*”:

The year of my birth, 1940, was the fulcrum of America in the twentieth century, when the nation was balanced precariously between the darkness of the Great Depression on one side and the storms of war in Europe and the Pacific on the other. It was a critical time in the shaping of this nation and the world, equal to the revolution of 1776 and the perils of the Civil War. Once again the American people understood the magnitude of the challenge, the importance of an unparalleled national commitment, and, most of all, the certainty that only one resolution was acceptable. The nation turned to its young to carry the heaviest burden, to fight in enemy territory and to keep the home front secure and productive. These young men and women were eager for the assignment. They understood what was required of them, and they willingly volunteered for their duty.¹

This was my parents’ generation, a generation called to serve their nation and sacrifice for a cause that was international in scope, a generation Brokaw believes is “the greatest generation any society has ever produced.”

In Brokaw’s most recent book, *BOOM! Voices of the Sixties*, the tone is quite different. The generation of the 60’s was much more self-absorbed and individualistic. Their heroes did not have “a rendezvous with destiny” on the battlefields of the world; rather, they had psychedelic encounters of free love as they paraded their rock concerts around the world. The book’s opening quote comes not from a president but from a singer, Bob Dylan: “*The times they are a-changin’*.”

When I began to tell members of that large, raucous generation born just after World War II, the baby boomers, that I was thinking of writing a book on the aftershocks of the Sixties, a number of them laughed a little nervously and said, “What are you going to call this one? The Worst Generation?”²

Today we must ask, Where are the leaders who are called out to confront evil and stand for righteousness? As Paul concludes his letter to Timothy, the tone turns solemn as he reminds Timothy of his supreme responsibility as a leader in the “Lord’s army.” In one of the most solemn exchanges in Scripture, Paul charges Timothy to “fight the good fight,” and undergirds his resolve with motivations so potent they could rouse the dead.

Our text has three major divisions. In the first, vv. 11-16, Paul renews Timothy’s commission by giving him his battle instructions (vv. 11-12), and then highlights the importance of the war he is fighting (vv. 13-16). In the second, vv. 17-19, he instructs Timothy on how to rescue the rich from their riches by making them fit recruits for active duty. He then concludes with his final charge and blessing, vv. 20-21.

I. Battle Orders 1 Tim 6:11-12

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. 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. (1 Tim 6:11-12 TNIV)

A. Live up to your calling:” Man of God”

Paul makes his appeal by addressing Timothy not by name, but by the honorific title, “man of God.” This is the only time this title is used in the New Testament, but it is found over 80 times in the OT. It was used of David, Israel’s greatest king. Every other occurrence refers to Israel’s prophets, who were uniquely called into the divine counsel and commissioned by God himself to be faithful messengers to deliver his word to wicked kings. The predominance of usages is found in the book of Kings. There it occurs 60 times, especially in reference to Elijah and Elisha, who stood out like meteors against the night sky when the religious and political world had turned completely decadent. By addressing Timothy with this honorary title, Paul is placing him alongside these prophets in the “Prophetic Hall of Fame.”

B. Face in the right direction and RUN!

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. (6:11)

Timothy is now given his marching orders. The thrust of the charge has little to do with the mechanics of his office; rather, it is supremely ethical. He is to run away from evil, as he would a dangerous animal, and chase after godliness. The strong adversative, “but you,” sets him apart as one whose character surpasses the false teachers, and the majority of the population in Ephesus, whose lives were dominated by lust and greed. Throughout Scripture, the pursuit of godliness has both negative and positive components. We must learn to always first say “no” to sin before we can say “yes” to godliness. We can’t follow Christ without first denying ourselves and taking up a cross; nor can we put on our “new clothes” without first taking off our old ones.

Stott suggests,

There is no particular secret to learn, no formula to recite, no technique to master. The apostle gives us no teaching on “holiness and how to attain it.” We are simply to run from evil as we run from danger, and to run after goodness as we run after success.³

Paul’s dual command to “flee...and pursue” may be reminiscent of the time Elijah fled an arena raging with controversy and danger after his confrontation with the false prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Fleeing for his life, he ran all the way to Horeb, the mountain of God. Once there he entered a cave, perhaps the same cave where Moses asked of God, “Now show me your glory” (Exod 33:18). When asked by the Lord what he was doing there, Elijah bemoaned his lonely existence and solitary fight against evil (1 Kgs 19:10). In response the Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord,” and that he would pass by. Wind, earthquake, fire followed, but God was not found in these dramatic acts of power. And then Elijah heard the still, quiet voice of God. Through the divine whispering he discovered that though life looked out of control, God was performing his kingdom work quietly yet powerfully through a chosen remnant of seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kgs 19:18). Because the Lord was in control, Elijah could be remain calm and endure. As the Lord revealed to

Elijah, we don't need the consensus of the culture to run this race, nor do we need the applause of the world to win the battle. What God's needs is just a few good men or women who are willing to lift their heads above the crowd, take aim at God, and pursue him.

How can you tell if people are chasing after godliness? It will be quite evident, as the Holy Spirit produces the fruit of these six virtues that describe authentic Christ-like character. Paul lists these qualities from the most comprehensive to the more specific.

The first, "righteousness," has different facets of meaning in Paul's letters. Here it most likely speaks of the ethical dimension, describing their uprightness in relationships. They are attentive to live for the benefit of others rather than themselves. "Godliness" adds the divine dimension that they love others out of devotion and respect for God. "The next three terms, 'faith, love, endurance,' form a traditional triad that summarizes Christian existence."⁴ As we nurture our faith in Christ we grow in our love for one another. Love is the natural outworking of faith. And endurance "expresses the determination and perseverance that are needed to support faith and love in the face of adversity."⁵ The final quality, "gentleness," gives leaders the ability to help others change, because they are not consumed with an air of self-importance. Paul highlights this as an essential ingredient when confronting contentious individuals, because it opens the door to repentance (2 Tim 2:25).

Paul's next two commands give further definition to the intensity and outcome of this struggle.

C. Train with intensity!

Fight the good fight of the faith. (6:12a)

The struggle to live a holy life by constantly nurturing our faith is no easy task. From Paul's perspective, it takes the same kind of rigorous effort and strenuous training that an athlete would practice to compete in the Olympic Games. The verb *agonizomai* means, "to engage in a contest," "fight," "struggle." It is a favorite term of Paul's and one that he uses to describe the things in life worth *agonizing* over (1 Cor 9:29; Col 1:28-29).

The point is that these attractive virtues of godliness don't develop by accident. No, they are the result of countless choices to turn away from the world's way and to habitually chase after these virtues, constantly working at them and refining them until they become second nature. As Jesus exhorted his disciples, it takes such effort that few will submit to the training:

"Make every effort [*agonizomai*] to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to." (Luke 13:24)

No soldier can go into battle without intensity or focus. Mediocrity will kill you. Thus Timothy must not grow weary or complacent in his faith but must face every day with a fresh commitment to keep it vital and strong. This will lead him to eternal life, the ultimate objective.

D. Our final objective: Internalization

Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. (6:12b)

One of the great dangers in being set aside for ministry is becoming a religious professional. Pastors we can spend so much time studying and teaching *about* God that we can lose the intimacy of *worshiping* God; or we can become so cloistered in committees managing life for God that we miss out on that inexpressible joy of seeing God freely dispensing life to the lost. Paul commands Timothy to never settle for a second hand faith. He must "take hold" of what is truly life. There are to be no spectators in this sport; even the coaches must get down and dirty in the midst of the contest. I'm reminded of Jesus' words to the disciples when they

were overwhelmed by a hungry crowd and wanted him to send them away so they could buy food and eat. Jesus' response was the pointed, "You give them something to eat" (Mark 6:37).

Though Timothy is young and retiring, he is not permitted to serve on the periphery of life. He must "take hold" of what is truly life. "Take hold," *epilabanomai*, means to "take hold of, grasp...sometimes with violence," "to pounce on" something, and "to take hold of in order to make one's own." (BADG) Just as some couples renew their wedding vows when they arrive at major milestones in their marriages, so Paul ignites Timothy's spiritual passions by evoking the memory of his baptism and the confession of faith he gave before the holy assembly. Now is the critical time for Timothy to make good on his commitment by taking hold of the life that he was called to and received at his baptism and making it fully his own.

Being well aware of our human weaknesses, Paul knows that appeals to the will are short-lived without strong motivations. Thus he undergirds Timothy's resolve with powerful motivations, which had become the grounds of Paul's faithful service as well.

II. The Nature of this War (1 Tim 6:13-16)

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 to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time—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. To him be honor and might forever. Amen. (6:13-16)

A. The Commander in Chief (6:13a)

Few things motivate troops in the thick of the battle as when their commander in chief pays a visit to the front lines to strengthen their resolve and remind them of their vital role in this critical hour of world history. Imagine the emotions you would feel as you prepared to stand before the President of the United States, and the inspiration you would feel as he looked into your eyes.

As glorious as that moment might seem it pales in comparison to the reality that Christians labor under. Whether we know it or not, we carry out all our labors "in the sight of God," whose presence is more near and constant than any head of state. This heightens our sense of duty and obligation. God is described as the one "who gives life to everything." This means that he is not only intimately involved with all that we do, but he is the One whom we may depend on to carry out his commands, for his resources for life are inexhaustible.

B. The model of courage: His finest hour (6:13b)

Christ stands alongside God as Paul's witnesses. The apostle is not referring to Christ in his exalted state, however, but remembering his humanity for his courageous act of faithful testimony before Pilate. My parents were big fans of Winston Churchill. As young boy I would often gaze at the titles of his six-volume history of WWII. The title that always stood out to me was *Their Finest Hour*. This would also serve as an apt title for Jesus' faithfulness during this critical moment in the history of our redemption. If we look carefully at Jesus' testimony in John 18:33-37, we discover that he contends for the truth, announcing to Pilate that he is indeed King. But he does not "contend" or "fight" the world's way, for his kingdom, he says, "is not of this world. If it were, my servants would *fight* (*agonizomai*) to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders" (v. 36). As Timothy's witness, Jesus becomes the supreme model of one who fought "the good fight of faith."

C. The duration of the conflict (6:14-15a)

Having invoked the divine witnesses, Paul now completes his charge to Timothy, ordering him to be vigilant to carry out these commands “without spot or blame” throughout the duration of the conflict. How long can we expect this conflict to last? What is the time frame of our obedience? When can we retire from active duty? The answer is clear: this conflict will last as long as history. It will not end until the glorious “appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” There is absolutely no retiring from our training in godliness.

Well then, when can we expect the end of history? Again Paul is clear. Unlike so many prophecy gurus today, he says he doesn't know. Only God knows, and he “will bring about in his own time.”

D. The Glorious End (6:15b-16)

The final volume of Churchill's history of WWII is entitled *Triumph and Tragedy*. The Allies triumphed, but as in all wars, triumph was marred by tragedy. On the European front, it was uncovering Hitler's unspeakable horror of the Holocaust. In the East, it was the terrible annihilation of two Japanese cities with the birth of the atomic bomb. No matter how glorious, human triumphs are always accompanied by scars of sin.

But when God intervenes in history with his salvation, his triumph will be unalloyed, with no sorrow in it. Paul describes Christ's coming as an epiphany:

The word group had a long history of usage in connection with the military victories of Greek kings, and was absorbed into Roman imperial discourse... For anyone in Asia Minor at this time, the term “epiphany” would have called to mind first and foremost the victories of Augustus (Savior) that brought an end to the civil wars and introduced the pax Romana, with its benefits, to the Imperial provinces... The Imperial cult, along with other civic cults (e.g. of Artemis in Ephesus, whose manifestations was described with the term “epiphany”), became the vehicle for communication of the political-social-religious ideals of Rome.⁶

Paul's use of the term is indeed subversive. He co-opts language that carried a lot of political freight and invests it with new and greater meaning. Christians carry out their divine mandate on a stage far greater than Rome's glory, one that spans the creation of the world to the end of history, marked by the divine, not Roman, epiphanies of Christ's incarnation and his glorious return.

So glorious will be God's final triumph, Paul concludes his charge giving praise to God in a doxology which may have originated from an early Christian hymn. As Stott suggests, “our confidence in God's perfect timing, and our consequent willingness to leave things in his hands, arise from the kind of God we know him to be.”⁷ The apostle lists four attributes that describe God's sovereign rule as being altogether beyond any human authority or control, striking a fatal blow to Rome's imperial claims:

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. To him be honor and might forever. Amen. (6:15b-16)

The first, “the blessed and only Ruler,” speaks of God as the only sovereign, ruling out all others, because no one else makes good on their promise to give us a “blessed” future so rewarding it can only be described in terms of a New Heaven and New Earth. No politician can remake our nation into a Garden of Eden.

“King of kings and Lord of lords” were titles that had their roots in the intertestamental period as a Jewish protest against pagan polytheism. In the Greek translation of Daniel 4:37, Nebuchadnezzar, immediately after being severely humbled, praises Israel's God as the “God of gods

and Lord of lords and King of kings.” It is blasphemous to consider any other so-called god as even being on the same playing field as Israel's God. In the New Testament, the title is reserved for Christ (Rev. 17:14; 19:16), which clearly indicates he alone is God and has no rivals.

The third phrase, “who alone is immortal,” implies that God is not subject to corruptibility – all those changes that plague us in old age. Though the Roman emperors claimed immortality for themselves, Paul shoots that clay pigeon right out of the sky. We must never affirm others when they say, “Man's soul is immortal.” Immortality is not innate to us; it is a divine gift of God's grace through the atoning work of Christ.

The final phrase, “who lives in unapproachable light, who no one has seen or can see” describes the glory of God's holiness and habitation. The psalmist says, “The LORD wraps himself in light as with a garment” (Psa 104:2). When God's fiery appearance descended on Sinai, the mountain erupted like a volcano, with smoke and fire. Moses had to set up barriers around the mountain, lest the people “force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish” (Exod 19:21). On rare occasions an individual caught a glimpse of God's back, or experienced his presence in a theophany, but no one could endure the burning brightness of his “face.” So great is the gap between man and God that God is beyond human apprehension. And the fact that he is invisible means that without his revelation to us we would be shut up to absolute ignorance. Knowing these wonderful truths, like Paul we can give praise and glory to our God.

To this One, “be honor and might forever!” for...

God is faithful: he is the only one who can give us a secure future.

God is invincible: there is no one able to thwart his rule.

God is immortal: there is nothing that can compromise his rule.

God is inaccessible: there is no evil or sin that can manipulate his rule.

We might expect Paul to end the letter here, but he doesn't. He concludes with a very practical word to the rich. The reason perhaps is that Timothy would be in a much better frame of mind to instruct them, having just been reminded of his original commission. Another thought is that Paul wanted to end his letter with the entire church in view, since the goal of the letter was to create a healthy community, and the rich needed to be recruited to serve in God's kingdom.

III. Recruiting Rich Recruits (1 Tim 6:17-19)

Paul doesn't condemn riches per se, nor does he tell those who have large incomes to give it all away at once. Instead, he tells Timothy to instruct them about the dangers of riches, the responsibilities that accompany riches, and finally, the investments that transcend riches.

A. The dangers of riches

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. (6:17)

Someone has said, “Money isn't everything, but whatever is in second place sure is far behind.” Though we laugh, it is a sad commentary that the church is often accused of catering to the rich to fund their agendas. While it is tempting to view the rich as vital to the kingdom, Paul brings us down to earth. Because the kingdom is not about money (it's about heart, holiness, and commitment), the rich are going to need some extra help so they don't miss out on what the kingdom is all about. Attached to wealth are dangers that are destructive to communities.

First, wealth can make us smug, causing us to look down on others less fortunate than ourselves. Money is never to be used to give us social status or airs of any kind. Second, wealth weakens our trust in God by

giving us a false security about the future. But as anyone who has invested in the stock market knows, you can't be sure about anything. As Tom Wright affirms,

Not only can't you take it with you when you go...but you can't be sure you're going to keep it while you're here. In a world increasingly dominated by money it seems almost indecent to mention it, but the New Testament, as so often, is severely practical, and reminds us of facts our cultures wants us to forget. Money comes and goes; God doesn't.⁸

B. The responsibilities of riches

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. (6:18)

Wealth brings responsibilities. Having more money than you need gives you more opportunities of doing good and sharing with those in need. Just think of all the good that could be done with wealth. On the largest scale, the building of schools, hospitals, and churches, or supporting the arts. Aren't you glad there were wealthy patrons whose generosity subsidized countless pieces of art through the centuries? For more modest incomes there is untold support we can give to our missionaries', or as Amy has shared this morning, for a modest fee you can adopt children around the world through the ministry of Compassion. The key is generosity: be generous.

But more than just giving money, Paul commands the rich to be "rich in good deeds." Oftentimes the rich excuse their non-involvement in ministry by saying that the more money they make, the more they will have to give; that taking time away from their work will be financially costly. The problem with that kind of thinking is that, as beneficial as money is, it isn't the primary thing God wants. God wants our hearts. By not being involved in sacrificial ministry the rich miss out on having their lives transformed.

C. Investments that transcend riches

In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. (6:19)

Paul says if you can train the rich in this manner, then their investments will have an eternal value that surpasses riches. And you don't have to wait until you die to enjoy the benefits, for these investments pay immediate dividends. Just think of the joy of enabling new institutions to come into being, or of being welcomed with grateful tears into the homes of those poorer than you. There isn't a price tag you can place on that kind of joy.

III. Final Charge: Trouble on the Horizon (1 Tim 6:20-21)

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have departed from the faith. Grace be with you all. (6:20-21)

Paul's final word to Timothy sums up the entire book with, "guard what has been entrusted to your care." The warning about avoiding "godless chatter...of what is falsely called knowledge" expresses Paul's concern over certain contemporary trends that by the third century would become fully developed into the heresy of Gnosticism. This heresy was characterized by endless speculations about inner enlightenment, secret knowledge, and the desire to free oneself from the constraints of the body. It still thrives today as millions look for the divine spark from within and fail to make a connection between their spirituality and the created order. But this is radically different from the life that Jesus offers. Tom Wright captures the essential difference between these two opposing world views:

Jesus calls us now, as he called his first followers, to accept his offer of new life, not to discover a secret one we already have. To put it another way, he calls us to "find our lives by losing them". And the life that we find will be the resurrection life in God's newly created world.

Paul's blessing is in the plural, which means he wanted to end this letter addressing not just Timothy but the entire community in Ephesus. As the Holy Spirit superintended the placement of this book in the canon of sacred Scripture, it is addressed now to us. Will we hear?

Over these past weeks some of you may have heard. Perhaps you will become the greatest for Christ in this generation. Amen.

¹ Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), 3.

² Tom Brokaw, *BOOM! Voices of the Sixties, Personal Reflections on the '60s and Today* (New York: Random House, 2007), xiii.

³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (BST; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 155.

⁴ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 409.

⁵ Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 409.

⁶ Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 415, 418.

⁷ Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, 159.

⁸ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone, The Pastoral Letters, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 77.

⁹ Wright, *Paul for Everyone, The Pastoral Letters, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, 80.