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1 Timothy 6:3-16

Twelfth Message

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# STILLING THE STORMS OF DISCONTENT

*SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH*

Watching the Olympic Games on television this past week, I have been amazed at the dedication and level of skill of the athletes. What incredible effort they put forth to achieve their moment of glory! I have been particularly impressed by the dedication of our women gymnasts. Out of 38,000 gymnasts in the country, only six were chosen to compete in Barcelona. I couldn't help but notice, however, at least early in the week, the fact that hardly any of the gymnasts were smiling, even though most of them were scoring very high marks (many over 9.9). There seemed to be a lack of joy among them. Even the young Russian woman who won the all-around gold medal stood stoically, unsmiling on the awards platform. Then we learned that following the last Olympics in Seoul, a Russian gymnastics coach committed suicide because the girl he coached failed to win the gold medal, winning only a silver. The media doesn't help, either. They too have become a force for discontent, with their carping, negative criticism of the athletes' performances.

A spirit of discontent rests upon society, it seems. How destructive this is to the human spirit! The apostle Paul, writing to Timothy in the city of Ephesus in the first century, says that this spirit of discontent is a key tactic of the devil to destroy a church, a home or a workplace. Satan is forever seeking to infiltrate churches in the guise of false teachers who plant seeds of discontent among the congregation. When these seeds take root, they choke out all the love and harmony in the family, turning its members one against another, until the church loses all its influence for good upon society.

This text from chapter 6 of 1 Timothy to which we come today is third instance where Paul addresses the problem of false teachers in the church. This was the main reason he sent Timothy to Ephesus in the first place, and the main reason behind his writing this letter—to deal with this troublesome issue of false teachers. He sent Timothy, not to found a church, but to restore the church that was already there, to still the storms of discontent which had begun to blow around this false teaching, and to restore in its place, love among the brethren.

Paul lays out three-step plan of attack for Timothy in handling this problem of discontent: how to make a proper diagnosis; how to adopt a right plan of action; and how to stay motivated to the end.

## I. Getting a proper diagnosis (6:3-10)

### (a) Recognizing false teaching (6:3)

**If anyone advocates a different doctrine, and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, but he has morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. (6:3-5 NASB)**

Timothy would recognize false teaching by using a two-fold test: what is its source, and what is its effect. Any teaching that deviates from the “sound,” healthy words of our Lord Jesus Christ can be classified as false teaching.

First, with regard to its source. The goal of teaching is not to be original, but to be faithful to the text. Teachers are stewards whose task is to pass along what has already been entrusted to them—the very words of Christ and his apostles. Timothy should feed the people on the pure wine of the scriptures, not the distilled, impure opinions of men. This was what would promote spiritual health among the congregation.

And second, with regard to its effect. What effect should teaching have? Godliness, is Paul's response. No matter which great doctrines are taught, creation, redemption, atonement, etc., their ultimate aim should be godliness, not speculation, fascination, or emotion. This should be the aim of all great preaching. The Scottish preacher, James Stewart, summed this up beautifully when he said that the focus of all preaching should be to

*Quicken the conscience by the holiness of God.*

*Feed the mind with the truth of God.*

*Purge the imagination by the beauty of God.*

*Devote the will to the purpose of God.*

### (b) Recognizing the point of issue: Their character (6:4a)

**(then) he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid (sick) interest in controversial questions and disputes about words...**

If Timothy recognized any deviation from these two goals, then he was dealing with a person of deviant character. False teaching is always a moral, not an intellectual issue. Behind the symptom of error lies a root of pride that has blinded the mind.

The outer manifestation of this pride is a sick (morbid) obsession in controversy and disputes (in contrast to the *healthy* words of 6:3). Paul's primary concern is not the content of these false teachers' doctrines; it is their character he sees as the greatest danger. False teaching is always symptomatic of a moral problem. Jesus was having a religious discussion with the woman at the well, in Samaria, a country that was riddled with false doctrine and false teaching, but he quickly got through to the heart of her problem. “Go call your husband,” he told her. “I don't have a husband,” she replied. “You're right,” said Jesus, “and the man you're living with now is not your husband either.” Before they could proceed with their conversation on religion, the moral issue had to be dealt with. Simon the silver-smith had a moral problem when he came to the apostle Peter in the story in Acts 8. But Peter quickly discerned the real issue. He said to Simon, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Therefore

repent...for I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity” (Acts 8:20-23).

False teaching is extremely dangerous. If it is left unchecked it will become a cancer within the body.

**(c) Recognizing the dangers of false teaching (6:4b-5, 9-10)**

...but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. (6:4b-5)

A sick obsession with controversy and minutiae pits people against one another, with the result that an argumentative spirit, envy and pride invade the church. No longer is the church contending for the light of the gospel in the dark world. Instead the battle lines are drawn within the church as brother contends against brother. This leads to malicious talk, as people begin to harbor evil suspicions about each other. Finally, everyone becomes irritated and stirred up.

False teaching spreads like cancer until it finally affects the brain. Thus, the manifestation of a “depraved mind” is when these people think that “godliness is a means of gain.” Godliness equals profit, in other words. That is how sick these teachers are, says Paul. Their motivation to ministry is greed. Teaching philosophy as a “cloak for greed” was a common accusation in those times. And teaching religion as a “cloak for greed” would not be difficult in Ephesus, a city whose economy was financed by the tourists who bought the trinkets for the cult of Artemis. How easy it would be for this same spirit to infiltrate the church.

Following the turn of the first century, the problem of people wanting to enter the ministry for profit continued and had to be addressed with severe guidelines. In the *Didache*, a manual for church government, the counsel is given that it was all right to receive a prophet if one’s teaching conformed to sound doctrine, but if a teacher stayed on for more than three days, or if he asked for money, then he should be rejected.

We are living in an extremely greedy age. There is no doubt that this spirit has invaded the church also. Christians are asked to contribute to all kinds of fake charities, from fake orphanages overseas to false revivals at home. Here at PBC we have a strict policy with regard to people who charge fees to come and minister among us. We don’t permit them to teach from this platform! I believe we are generous to those who come to share the Word of God with us. We appreciate hearing from others who are not part of our body, but we make it our policy to not bring people here who ask for a set fee or an exorbitant fee. I make it my own policy to not charge fees either whenever I travel to speak. As a matter of fact, I usually bring a group of men with me who pay their own way so that they can minister with me.

If this spirit of teaching for profit is allowed to enter the church, a feeling of discontent and the love of riches takes over. The apostle says,

**But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some have wandered away from the faith, by longing for it and pierced themselves with many a pang. (6:9-10)**

The desire to become rich begins as a snare. The devil puts on an attractive and alluring front so as to trap victims. But soon this desire

for riches entangles like a root, and the entanglements go deep into the heart, choking out everything else, until it is so well established it can produce any kind of evil it wishes. “The love of money is a root of all sorts of evil.”

Then this entanglement with money breaks people apart like a flood, leading them to “harmful desires which plunge men into ruin.” This word was used of ships which were inundated with sea water until they broke apart under the heavy seas and plunged into the dark abyss. The “love of money” can be so heavy, its pull so powerful, that not even the ballast of faith can hold one’s ship together. This was what had happened in Ephesus with some who had forsaken their faith altogether.

Finally, the love of money can impale you like a spear, piercing you through with penetrating pains. Why would anyone want to get rich? Who would want to suffer that kind of intense pain? Riches are a snare, a trap of Satan to impale people on his spear. Judas betrayed the Lord for thirty pieces of silver, and he was pieced through with such pain from his action that his only escape was suicide, so he hanged himself. But even then the pressure of the pain was so intense that his belly burst and his bowels gushed out. The love of money, says Paul, is the root of all sorts of evil.

False teachers miss the prime quality that makes for effective teaching, says the apostle.

**(d) Recognizing the key ingredient missing in their lives: Contentment (6:6-8)**

But godliness is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing in the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. And if we have food and covering, (then) with these we shall be content.

The Greeks defined contentment as “a self-sufficiency that gives one an independence in life.” But here Paul defines contentment as Christ-sufficiency that frees one from the cares of the world. Writing in the 1600’s, in his book *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, Jeremiah Burroughs said: “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.” Note that this is not referring to merely being outward quiet, but the whole frame of the inward soul is quiet before God.

This is the first thing that teaching doctrine is supposed to produce in life. The Bible begins with creation and ends with eschatology, and the implications of both are given by Job: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return.” During the short journey in between, God has promised to meet all our needs. Knowing this makes materialism irrelevant and greed irrational.

Paul would say if a person is not content, exhibiting that sweet inner spirit, then he should not be given a platform to speak in the church. This is why the apostle is far more concerned with the character of the false teachers than with their doctrine. If Timothy were to rush in and do battle with doctrine, he would only be pulled into the controversy and made to fight on their terms. This would destroy his own sense of contentment, his most precious possession.

Having made his diagnosis of the problem of false teachers, Paul goes on to lay out a plan for Timothy to respond, using the imagery of athletics, that of a runner, a wrestler and an archer.

## II. The right plan of attack (6:11-12)

### (a) Run the right race

**But you, O man of God, flee these things; and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.**

Timothy's first concern should not be in doing battle with the false teachers, but in attending to his own character. "You (in contrast to all others)," says Paul, "are 'a man of God'."

"Man of God" was the OT title of honor for men like Moses and David. The term also was used of the two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, who stood out as God's spokesmen in a corrupt age. On one occasion, Elijah fled an arena of controversy (following his encounter with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel), and ran all the way to the land to Horeb, the mountain of God. He came to a cave (perhaps the same cave where Moses asked of God, "Show me Thy glory"), and it was there that he heard the still, quiet voice of God. Then he knew that God would do the work of his kingdom powerfully, through a remnant. The Lord was in control, so Elijah could endure, and be gentle.

We have just heard the news of the passing of Bob Smith, the last surviving member of the group of five men who founded Peninsula Bible Church more than forty years ago. Bob Smith was a great source of godly wisdom to me on many occasions. Once, when I was an intern at PBC, I was asked to speak at the funeral of a young man who was high on drugs and was struck and killed by a car driven by his friends. I had never spoken at a funeral before, and the very week of the funeral I was planning on a leaving on vacation with my wife. Needing advice, I went into Bob Smith's office and asked him what he thought I should do. He looked at me with those piercing blue eyes and said, "Brian, you are God's man! If you don't speak the truth, who will speak?" Then he shared with me his outline on how to do a funeral. Over twenty years, and many funerals, I have not deviated from the outline that Bob Smith gave me that day. There was a sense of despair at the funeral, but I got to raise high the banner of Jesus Christ and his gospel. This is Paul's advice to Timothy. When controversy flares, and when false teachers are preying on the flock, his role was to be what God had made him to be, a "man of God."

When winds of controversy begin blowing into our hearts, the best advice is to run, to flee to God before we are consumed. Let us not become caught in damaging controversies. If we do, we will begin acting like our enemy. The proverb says,

**For lack of wood the fire goes out,  
Without whispers, contention quiets down. (Prov 26:20)**

Run the right race, says Paul—run toward God.

And second,

### (b) Fight the right fight

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

Christians must be willing to contend, to do battle, but over the things that are essential. Alexander Karelin is an immensely strong Graeco-Roman wrestler from Russia. He is so good at his sport that he picks up his opponents with a full-body lift, then he flips them upside-down, crashing them on their necks. One Romanian wrestler who has faced this man 13 times was interviewed on television. "I'm not going to contend over that," he said, "it's not worth it."

Much of the controversy and word battles that Christians engage in are not worth breaking the church's neck over! Recently someone gave me a book that is critical of a certain theological system. After reading it, I felt its spirit was wrong. While I agreed with the author's viewpoint, he was far too polemical and argumentative for my liking. I don't want the book in my library because it stirs up my soul against my brethren. What is worth going to battle over is the real fight, "the good fight of faith." Let us agonize over that, bringing people to faith, and then building them up in their faith.

There is a third thing.

### (c) Grasp the right goal

**take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses, (6:12b)**

The goal of the competitors in the Olympics is winning gold medals. To do so, these athletes are willing to go through the agony of training and strict diets, inflicting punishment and pain on their bodies. But here Paul holds out a transcendently better prize—eternal life itself, life incorruptible—and we don't have to wait for the future to receive it.

The figure Paul has in mind here is a wrestler. From this text, I think of Jacob's wrestling with God (Gen 32:22-32). Jacob wrestled with deceit all his life, but one night he found himself wrestling with the Life-giver himself. In order to prevail over Jacob, and in order to bless him, which was what Jacob wanted, the man had to dislocate Jacob's thigh. The secret to grasping eternal life, of course, is to give up. You can't have the blessing until you let go. Jacob had to learn to give up in order that he might be truly content. How difficult a lesson this is for all of us to learn!

So when controversy comes, the apostle's advice is, don't worry, be godly. The best defense is a good offense. Separate yourselves from controversy and run to God. Listen to the still, small voice, and then contend over the real issues that bring eternal life.

There is one thing left—how to remain motivated.

## III. Keeping motivated until the end (6:13-16)

**I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He will bring about at the proper time—He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords; who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light; whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.**

Three things will serve to motivate Timothy: Christ's example, Christ's appearance, and Christ's glory.

### (a) The example of Christ

**Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate (6:13b)**

Timothy had made a good confession at his baptism. Jesus also made a good confession at the beginning, but he had completed the course, making a good confession before Pontius Pilate at the end. There was much controversy in Israel as Jesus made his way to Jerusalem for the final time, yet he did not waste one ounce of energy trying to infiltrate the Sanhedrin, lobby the Romans, or derail Judas.

His sole concern was to make a faithful confession, even during the mock trial to which he was subjected, until the end. Silent as a lamb being led to slaughter, Jesus entered into battle only to contend for the faith. He saved the life of the criminal; he cared for and made provision for his mother; he warned the mothers of Jerusalem about the impending disaster upon the city. Let us follow the example of Jesus who did not waste his time with controversy.

How did he do it? It was through the power of God who was with him, the God who gave him eternal life all through his terrible ordeal. Timothy's fight would never be as traumatic and difficult, but the same God was with him, as he will be with us too in our time of trial.

#### (b) The appearance of Christ

**that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He will bring about at the proper time (6:14-15a)**

Jesus is coming back, says the apostle, and you will render an account to him. Did you grasp life indeed or were you derailed and distracted by controversy? Did you lose that gentle spirit and become combative and argumentative, winning all the word battles but losing the war for souls?

#### (c) The glory of Christ

**He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords; who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light; whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen. (6:15a-16)**

This benediction is "a gem from the devotional treasury of the Hellenistic synagogue which converts had naturalized in the Christian church" (Kelly). And this is not referring to a future glory; everything that Paul says about Christ is a present reality. Gordon Fee writes,

These terms have separate histories in the OT. *King of kings* was first used of the Babylonian and Persian emperors (Ezek. 26:7; Dan. 2:37; Ezra 7:12), but by the time of 2 Maccabees 13:4 is applied to God. Lord of lords was used in conjunction with "God of gods" to express God's absolute sovereignty over all other "deities" (Deut. 10:17; Ps. 136:2-3). The two terms had already been joined in Judaism in 1 Enoch 9:4; they are joined again as designations of Christ in Rev. 17:14 & 19:16. Here they emphasize God's total sovereignty over all powers, human and divine. (Gordon Fee, *1 Timothy*, NIBC)

As we contemplate this, our hearts will become quieted and we will be content. The disciples panicked during the storm on the Sea of Galilee, but Jesus stilled the winds, demonstrating that he was the Lord of the elements. We don't need more activists in the church; what we need is more of Jesus. He can still the storms that rage in our souls, and the storms of controversy that rage in the church. He alone possesses immortality. He alone is incorruptible, dwelling in unapproachable light. What an inheritance we have as Christians, for we too will share that glory with him on the great day.

The glory of the Barcelona Olympics burst forth when the archer shot his arrow over the Olympic torch and the flame illuminated the night sky. It was a magnificent sight, although it was a corruptible glory that would last but a few days. We remember the glory of the city of Sarajevo during the Winter Olympics a few years ago. Where is that glory today? Now the winds of greed and war have now turned that glory into blood and rubble. But it will not be so in God's city, the New Jerusalem, built through the blood of Christ, and illuminated by the light of the Spirit that burns brighter than any archer's arrow. When that city descends, the light from its flame will light up the entire city, against the darkened sky, and its glory will light up the entire earth forever and ever.

How can we remain motivated until that glorious day? By the example of Christ, the appearance of Christ, and the glory of Christ. What the church needs today is men and women of God who, like Moses, when all of Israel was in consternation at the foot of Mt. Sinai, separated himself to ascend to the mountain of God. There said to the Lord, "I pray Thee, show me Thy glory" (Exod 33:18).

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