

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### 1 Timothy 6:3-21 *"Fight The Good Fight"*

In the strange Providence of God, we come to this passage in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy on Memorial Day weekend. I suspect you would agree with Paul that there is a battle going on. But it is not always the one we think, and the protagonists (or contestants, as I will argue later) are not always who we think. So it's important to be clear about what it means to *"fight the good fight of the faith."*

Memorial Day in the USA has its roots in the Civil War, when Southern women began to put flowers on the graves of fallen soldiers. It became a national day in 1868 when flowers were placed at Arlington National Cemetery on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers alike, but it was not until 1971 that Congress made it a national holiday. So we remember today with a mixture of sadness and gratitude, those who gave their lives in our armed forces in defense not only of the nation but also the values we hold dear, and we pray for those who serve in uniform today in dangerous places in a world all too often at war.

Some would argue that there is another battle going on, for the soul of our country - the "culture wars," some call them - but it should be clear to anyone who thinks about them that the cultural issues are much more complex than they are often portrayed to be, and that good people - and Christian people - are to be found on all sides of these issues. The same is true in communities that feud

over school budgets, churches that passionately debate their budgets, or families that find it hard to agree on their budget priorities. Each one of us also has within us unresolved issues - battles, if you will - about many things. And of course you will have noticed that too many disputes, large and small, center on or are motivated by money - a subject on which Jesus, and Paul, had much to say to Christians.

#### 1) *In Ephesus*

What were the issues that Paul says Timothy should fight for? The major one that we have heard over and over is *the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ vs. the false teachings* proclaimed by some leaders in the church in Ephesus. Once more Paul reminds Timothy to combat the heresies because they are dead ends, and lead only to "unhealthy" controversies, quarrels, strife, malice, evil suspicions, and constant friction. Paul calls such things by a name he makes up - "word battles" - which aptly describes what a waste of time they are, and how they are diverting the church in Ephesus from their true calling.

But then Paul reveals a root, or a connection, of the heretics that he has not described before: the love of money. The false teachers are apparently profiting financially from their teachings. That sounds strange to us, but reflects the widespread 1<sup>st</sup> century practice of philosophers and teachers

charging for their teachings – an action that Paul studiously avoids in all his Christian ministry, to avoid any suspicion that he is profiting from preaching the free life-saving gospel of Jesus Christ.

So Paul sets up another contrast for Timothy to fight for: *faith, godliness and contentment vs. greed and folly*. So his argument runs that false teaching will lead to strife, and that love of money will lead to a trap and to ruin. The image is of an animal smelling an attractive aroma that tempts them to leave the safe path, and they fall into a snare or trap and come to disaster. Paul is clear: Christians in Ephesus should beware the “word battles” that lead to strife, and instead hold onto the truth that leads to eternal life; and they should beware the love of money that leads to ruin, and instead trust God, be content, and be generous, and they will have “treasure in heaven” – as Jesus had said.

The 1<sup>st</sup> century city of Ephesus was dominated by a huge temple of the Greek goddess Artemis (whom the Romans called Diana). We read in the *Book of Acts* that about 15 years earlier, when Paul and Timothy together had spent over two years in the city preaching the gospel and establishing the church that Timothy now oversees, that a public riot was caused by the local silversmiths bemoaning their loss of trade in silver statues and shrines to Artemis, now that these new Christians had turned so many people away from idolatry. “We are losing our business” they yelled, and Paul and his friends were nearly lynched.

Such is the power of money, as Jesus had taught: it can devour people; become an object of worship – “*mammon*,” Jesus called it. That idol has haunted churches, communities and nations, through all time. Beware, says Jesus; beware, says Paul, or it will devour you. It is no less a problem today. As a nation, we are addicted to

financial reports, stock indexes, up-to-the-second valuations of every company, commodity and currency. Companies now make huge profits simply by betting their reserves of cash on the future movements of everything imaginable – the likely price of oil, or corn, or company stock, or anything that anyone is ready to set a price on. We are truly becoming a nation that knows – second by second – “the price of everything and the value of nothing.”

Money has become the last sacred thing in our culture. As I have mentioned before, to the embarrassment of a few, many people now would rather talk about their sex lives than about how much they earn or how much they give. Even churches spend far more time passionately debating details of their budgets than they do on discussing how their programs might better reach various communities with the gospel, or serve the pressing needs of young people – and we live in a community that has seen more than its share of teenage suicides!

## 2) *Fight The Good Fight*

“*Timothy*,” says Paul as he concludes his letter: “*man of God*,” you should “*flee all this*.” Keep your heart and mind fixed on your calling, and lead the church away from word-battles and the love of money to true godliness. Flee from all this diseased rubbish, and *pursue righteousness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness*. Take hold of the eternal life you have been promised in the gospel; hold firmly to the part of “true life” you have already received.

Relearn and teach others that *the “profit” that the gospel brings is contentment*, and pursue what is true to the faith and not to the diseased values of a pagan world. “*Fight the good fight of the faith*.” Now to us that sounds like a battle cry, and Paul is certainly not averse to military metaphors: in his own

earlier letter to the church leaders in Ephesus, he had said *"Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms"* (Ephesians 6). Therefore Christians need spiritual weapons to fight: *truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the word of God, the Spirit of God, prayer.*

But in fact the metaphor here "fight the good fight" is not a military one, but an athletic one – the sense is *"box a good match, wrestle a good contest, run a good race."* Paul uses the same language of himself in his 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to Timothy: *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.. and now the crown the Lord will award awaits me."* (2 Tim 4). Finish the race, wrestle your opponent to the floor, wear the laurel wreath. This is not a battle where you aim to kill your opponent; this is a tournament where you aim to win a race into God's welcoming arms. That *does not mean it's a game* – far from it, if you know Paul's passion for the gospel – but he does not wish anyone to be killed in battle.

Timothy, Christian leaders, believers: remember *whose you are and what you are called to!* You belong to and you serve God the Ruler of all – the blessed one, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the one who is immortal and unapproachable. Your calling is to serve him, not play word games or pursue money! One day he will reveal his Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, as the designated "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev 17, 19) and every knee will bow before him.

So do not waste your time and energy! If you have confessed Jesus as Lord, then live that way - live as a person who gladly serves him, who holds on firmly to the truth of the gospel, who clings to the true life you have already tasted. Remember *whose you are*, and

remember *your calling*. Pursue the truth, avoid false teaching, refrain from obsessing over wealth – because it is not secure, it is a trap if you rely on it, and only God can truly be relied on – and practice contentment, pursue godliness, faith, love, perseverance, gentleness.

Fight the good fight *of the faith* - don't play word-battles, don't be trapped into thinking that how much money you have is important. Put your trust in God, allow him to provide your needs (food and clothing would be enough to make me content, says Paul). You brought nothing into the world, you will take nothing out, and all you accumulate here must be seen in that light. To be sure, lots of money here can buy you a pleasant life, and even excellent health care, which may extend your life by 10%. But when you are dying, it won't matter much.

Paul had earlier told the Ephesian elders, "as the Lord Jesus said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Your generosity counts for more than your accumulation. Don't let money ruin your life, or your family, or your community, or your church. When will Shoreham-Wading River start debating educational goals, and what counts as success in our community, and what happens to kids who don't measure up? When will shared community values start to mean as much as the tax rate? When will our schools be freed from repeated budget battles to do their jobs of guiding and educating our children?

When will families decide that money should not drive all decisions – including the phantom of "the good college" that leads to "the good job..." Whatever happened to human flourishing, to happiness, to kindness and gentleness and perseverance and faith? What are we teaching our children? What is the church teaching our children? What kind

of example are we setting in the community, or to our families?

Whose are we? What is our calling? Paul wanted Timothy to remember. Flee the rubbish, pursue the good. Hold on to life, preach the true gospel. Fight for faith, not for power or prestige or money or having the last word.

Lord, have mercy on us all, and especially on those who are wounded in battles - the unavoidable ones and the unnecessary ones - and teach us a better way. Help us willingly and gladly to subject ourselves to the King of kings, the giver and sustainer of life.

Let us pray...