

RUF Bible Study – 1 & 2 Timothy
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1 Tim. 1:12-20

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength to do his work. He considered me trustworthy and appointed me to serve him, 13 even though I used to blaspheme the name of Christ. In my insolence, I persecuted his people. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. 14 Oh, how generous and gracious our Lord was! He filled me with the faith and love that come from Christ Jesus.

15 This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all. 16 But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life. 17 All honor and glory to God forever and ever! He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen.

18 Timothy, my son, here are my instructions for you, based on the prophetic words spoken about you earlier. May they help you fight well in the Lord's battles. 19 Cling to your faith in Christ, and keep your conscience clear. For some people have deliberately violated their consciences; as a result, their faith has been shipwrecked. 20 Hymenaeus and Alexander are two examples. I threw them out and handed them over to Satan so they might learn not to blaspheme God.

Have you heard of a man named Thomas Bilney? Thomas Bilney was a Fellow of Trinity Hall in Cambridge in 1520. He was searching for peace but couldn't find it. So he started reading his Bible. He was converted, and became a preacher, eventually dying at the stake during the English Reformation.

So what? Bilney was a leader. Not all leaders are burned at the stake, but they do suffer persecution and they do experience times of great gladness. Have you been through these kinds of times? We'll look at both of them in this passage.

Leaders Fight

18 Timothy, my son, here are my instructions for you, based on the prophetic words spoken about you earlier. May they help you fight well in the Lord's battles.

We're starting with the last part first. Paul gives instructions to Timothy, and they appear to be connected with his calling from an earlier time. Great things were thought of for Timothy when he was commissioned for this ministry. Paul reminds him of them.

He tells him to fight the good fight. The ESV translates: wage the good warfare. The NLT has: fight well in the Lord's battles. Leading entails courage, forthrightness, the ability to carry out one's task, and finishing well.

We as Christians tend to think we shouldn't fight. Aren't we taught by the words of Jesus to turn the other cheek? Yes, we are. But to understand that as not standing for anything at all is to totally misunderstand it. CS Lewis wrote, "Certain things, if not seen as lovely or detestable, are not being correctly seen at all."²

I recently read a book entitled *9 Things You Simply Must Do*. The author said he studied successful people to try to determine what habit and practices led to their success. One of them made me laugh because it was this: Hate Well. Hate well. Most of us would say that hate is bad, hate is something you shouldn't feel, hate comes with fear, we simply shouldn't hate. But it's not true. As Cloud writes, "We are defined in part by what we love and by what we hate."³ Proverbs 6 says God hates arrogance, lying, innocent people being hurt, harmful schemes, evil practices, telling lies about others, and things that stir up dissension among people. And that means you should hate those things too. If you met someone who hated those things, you could be her friend. She would stand against bad things and therefore stand for good things.

Hate helps us move against certain traits and issues, thus moving us to be different from them. Hate causes us to protect what we value. My friend Marcine (one of my pilates partners who is about 70) told me about her daughter's asthma. Eucalyptus really set it off, so when she walked into a room and smelled that plant, she hated it. She had to get her daughter out of there. That is a good hate, a protective emotion. And hate moves to destroy bad things, which are what threatens the good.

What do you hate? The author also meant that we must love well, but he was making his point by asking this: What are you against? What will you battle? What will you fight? It's a good question.

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Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2007, website: www.ouruf.org. For this series, I used commentaries on 1 and 2 Timothy from Hughes, Stott, Knight, MacArthur, Ryken, and Clinton. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² Found in *9 Things People Simply Must Do*, Henry Cloud, p. 139

³ Cloud, 142. What follows is quoted, mixed up and paraphrased largely from the chapter on the book on this subject.

While it's important to understand what we hate, it is also essential to figure out *how* to hate. People and leaders who do this well can be depended on to hate in a way that solves problems as opposed to creating problems. Many of you hate subjectively, but you need to hate objectively. Subjective hate is toward an idea or an unresolved problem in your past that you've never dealt with. It is a pool of feelings and attitudes that reside in the soul, waiting to come out and it could come out in any situation really. Some things might set you off, but the hate just lives there and jumps out. This sort of hate in your life brings destruction and wrecks things. It blasts other people, causes overreaction, dissension, inability to resolve conflict and other relational breakdowns. It almost has a life of its own in people.

But objective hate solves problems, protects things that you value and stands against the things you do not want in your life. A person who does this well should be able to tell you what they stand against, why they stand against it, and what they propose to do to solve the problem when those things occur. And they do it not with a hateful attitude, but with respect. They pick objective times and places to deal with the problem. This person goes hard at the issue, but soft with the person. Subjective hate comes down hard on the person, but objective hate integrates love with the offending person. A leader who fights and hates well addresses the real toxins in life in specific effective ways that face the issues and respect the persons involved.

I'm not talking about little things that annoy us, unless those tap into subjective things we hate and haven't dealt with. Good hate is a stance for the most vital things in life and a stance against the things that would destroy them. It is a structure and a value.

How do you figure out what to hate then? The Bible helps you. Hate what God hates. Start with Proverbs 6 and the 10 Commandments. Stand for what God stands for. Love what he loves. Make it your policy to be around people who do the same thing, so you won't get confused and corrupted. Don't participate in evil. Love what is good. Don't rant and scream, but confront the issue and love the person. Mix your hatred with respect, kindness and forgiveness. Take a stand without being destructively angry.

So what will you fight against? What do you hate? How do you hate? Do you need to talk about some subjective hatred issues you have? Do you flare up at people? Are you conforming your hatred to the things on God's list?

Don't fight the bad fight. Craig Barnes tells of a story in the church where he pastored that involved a major uproar over coffee. It seems that the hospitality committee put up a coffee stand in the narthex. One of the ushers protested that this was a sacrilege to the sanctuary of the church and resigned. The rest of the ushers were upset, so the church constituted a committee to look into the issue, giving them eight weeks to meet with the parties. One Sunday a group of ushers staged a walkout because the head usher hadn't been brought back yet. This upset the elders. Barnes concludes: "In the middle of that, I'm not talking about Jesus with anybody. I'm not making hospital calls, or shepherding people through grief. I'm trying to figure out whether we should serve coffee in the narthex."⁴

Many of our squabbles are of this nature. I see this all the time with parents' complaints with the school we're involved with. 90% of them are ridiculous and petty. Don't fight the bad fight. Think about whether or not this will matter a year from now. Think about whether or not you are defending yourself. Think about whether or not you are micromanaging.

Hating well and fighting the good fight means we do fight though. For what? We fight for biblical inerrancy, that the Bible is true in all its parts and without and incapable of error. We fight for salvation through Christ alone, and justification by grace through faith alone. We fight for the truth. We fight for the peace and purity of the church. We fight against injustice, discrimination, greed, poverty, misuse, divorce, abortion, the wrecking of our society.

And we fight against Satan, the attacker and accuser. Satan is not idle. He is at war with Christ and his church.

Satan attacks the church by blinding the minds of unbelievers to the gospel, thereby keeping them away from the truth and the church. Satan attempts to devastate those who are already believers to cripple them and destroy credibility of their witness. Satan attacks the church by attacking marriage and family. Satan attacks the church through its leaders. Satan attacks the church through false religious systems.⁵

What does Paul say our weapons are in this fight, in this spiritual warfare? *19 Cling to your faith in Christ, and keep your conscience clear.*

When I was in high school, I got into *This Present Darkness*, a book by Frank Perretti. It followed a few people, and their guardian angels or guardian demons I suppose you could call them. There were dramatic overhead unseen battles as the angels and demons waged war over the souls of men. If a character prayed, your angel got a boost of power and could finish off the demon with a dramatic sword swoosh, cutting the demon in half.

It was exciting stuff. (I'm not planning on passing the books on to my kids by the way). I think there are angels and demons but am not quite sure how they work. And the tools Paul gives Timothy to fight with don't seem to make for a good story.

He says we fight the good fight with faith. This doesn't mean in closing our eyes and believing in something really hard to be true, like making a wish. It means the content of our faith. What our faith resides in. When we fight, we need to clarify our vision, know our facts, and cling to what is true.

⁴ Found in Ryken, 47

⁵ from MacArthur, 39-40

If you're like me, you doubt sometimes. Is any of this Christianity stuff true? Is it all a joke? I wonder this, and I'll be you do too. I go back to the content of our faith. I go back to Jesus, his life and his resurrection. I have studied this, and I really do think he lived. I think the accounts are trustworthy and he did miracles and spoke prophecies, which is cool but not quite enough for me. I think the Romans killed him by means of crucifixion. And – here is the important thing – I think he rose from the grave. Not rose in the hearts of his disciples. Not rose metaphorically or parabolically. I think he really, really rose from the grave, the man Jesus of Nazareth. And if *that* is true, then I can believe the rest of it too, because that is the really crazy thing that proves all the rest.

What is the content of your faith? Is it sure, or is it sinking sand?

We don't only have faith. We also have our consciences. Paul is talking about a Christian conscience, one that is molded by what God says is right and wrong. Friends, do what is right. Listen to your conscience, as it is informed by the Bible, the church and the Holy Spirit. Don't do what is wrong. Don't sear your conscience so badly that you fool yourself into mixing up right and wrong. I think you know that what you're doing is wrong. Please stop. Repent and believe the gospel today.

We like to keep these two areas separate, but Paul keeps bringing them back together. "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."⁶ John Calvin wrote: "A bad conscience is the mother of all heresies." People feel bad about their sin, refuse to repent, and then try to feel better by making ammendations in their faith. Morals slip, doctrines ebb, and the fight might be lost over time.

Do not sin. There. It is plain. Do not sin. Believe in the gospel. Take the Bible as true and do what it says.

What shall we do then when we fail? For it is easy to tell you to obey and believe the Bible, but I've found it awfully tough to do. What will you do with what you did last weekend? What will you do with how you treated your friend? What will you do with how you've used your body or used someone else's body? What will you do with your lying?

The first and best thing we should do when we fail is repent. We should repent early and often. We should practice repentance. When you go to church, you should hear and understand you are called to worship by God. You should confess your sins there privately and corporately, and you should hear God's assurance of forgiveness. This is not only true then but the model for you every day the rest of your week. I lead worship at our church and every Sunday I tell people they are sinners and need to repent. And every Sunday I tell them of God's forgiveness. You also find forgiveness at the Lord's Supper, as you come and commune with him at his table of grace and sustenance. When you fail, you find forgiveness in Jesus and you see it at church.

There is another response when you fail. Not repentance. Stubborn disobedience. Willful obstinacy in sin. A hard heartedness to God and his commands. What should happen then?

Paul writes of just such an example: *For some people have deliberately violated their consciences; as a result, their faith has been shipwrecked. 20 Hymenaeus and Alexander are two examples. I threw them out and handed them over to Satan so they might learn not to blaspheme God.*

They deliberately violated their consciences, and they shipwrecked not their faith but *the* faith. They were doing wrong, were bringing down the church by not repenting and something had to be done. So Paul handed them over to Satan. Whoa. We aren't used to people talking like this, are we?

We are great with delivering people from Satan. But this is delivering people to Satan. What we have hear is excommunication, the casting of these men outside the protection and care of the church.

There is a power in the church. That power certainly can be and has been abused. But in our day, you rarely see anyone excommunicated. In fact, many churches aren't even talking about sin anymore. They don't even mention it, and certainly don't ask you to confess your sins at church.

I have seen a few people excommunicated, and it is not a fun thing. Most people just don't stick around. They find a different church, one that doesn't take sin so seriously. But they shouldn't. The church is saying this: You have one foot in the world and one foot in the church. We're going to make you choose then, and see what you think. We've asked you to choose the church, but you won't. Okay then, be in the world.

Did Paul write them off? No. He took a drastic step so they would be restored. Excommunication. He cast them out of the church, away from God's care and protection and thus under the power of Satan. So they could choose. An attitude of severe grace. And the purpose is restoration. The idea and goal is that the person won't like it outside of the church, that she will come back in repentance and ask for forgiveness and seek to live a new life. As John Stott writes, "As radical as this punishment is, it is not permanent or irrevocable. Its purpose is remedial."⁷ Towner puts it this way: "For some it takes being cast off into the sea to realize the advantages on board ship."⁸

⁶ Ryken, 52

⁷ Stott, 58

⁸ Towner, found in Ryken, 55.

The purpose then is to punish sin and restore the sinner. Not to harm but to heal. “Paul saw the fellowship of the church as the place above all where the power of God was active to heal, guide, lead and direct other Christians. To forbid people access to it was therefore tantamount to sending them away into outer darkness, to a place where the only spiritual influence they might come under would be that of the accuser, the Satan. The aim, of course, is that after a very short time in such a condition they would realize their mistake and come back with sorrow and penitence, ready to learn wisdom.”⁹

Wow. That is not what we’re used to hearing about, is it? I’ll bet the number of sermons you’ve heard on excommunication don’t number very high.

We sing of this fight when we sing *For All the Saints*:

3. *O may Thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold, Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old, And win with them the victor's crown of gold. Alleluia, Allelu...*

4. *The golden evening brightens in the west; Soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest; Sweet is the calm of paradise the blessed. Alleluia, Allelu...*

Leaders take stands on things. They do this carefully, but they aren’t trying to get everyone to like them. They stand for what is right. They hate what is wrong.

What do you stand for? What do you fight for or against? What do you believe? How do your faith and your actions go together? Do they present a confusing picture to the world? How is your conscience these days? Does it need to be recalibrated back to what the Bible says is right and wrong? Do you need to repent of some things? Do you see that you need the church in your life, and the church has a power that you have not considered before?

Leaders Are Thankful

One of the things I’ve been reading about that leaders display is a culture of celebration. They make sure people know they are doing a good job, and they are a part of the joyful life of working together. Paul celebrates something here.

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength to do his work. He considered me trustworthy and appointed me to serve him, 13 even though I used to blaspheme the name of Christ. In my insolence, I persecuted his people. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. 14 Oh, how generous and gracious our Lord was! He filled me with the faith and love that come from Christ Jesus.

Paul celebrates. He celebrates his transformed life in the gospel.

How bad do you think you are? Are you dysfunctional? Are you morally handicapped? When I was in Sweden in 1999, most of the people we talked to thought bad things and bad people were morally sick and weakened. They didn’t need to be punished and justice didn’t need to be served. They needed rehabilitation. They needed some time away.

Paul says Christian leaders are thankful because they know they weren’t sick or handicapped. They were wretches. “Grace is amazing because it saves wretches, not because it puts a final polish on nice people. You cannot be saved if you are not lost. You cannot be freed unless you are enslaved.”¹⁰

Paul alludes to his story. He had chased down Christians and killed them. He was a religious zealot, thinking he was doing good when he was actually bringing harm and destruction. He did not deserve to be chosen. He was not worthy. He was ignorant in his unbelief. But that wasn’t a good enough reason. “God doesn’t excuse sin because of mitigating circumstances.”¹¹

That is true for all of us before we are Christians. We are ignorant and unbelieving. Christ prays for us: God have mercy on them, for they know not what they do.

But God saves sinners. He is generous and gracious to sinners, just like he was to Paul. He fills us with faith and love from Christ Jesus.

Paul goes straight from there to a trustworthy saying: *15 This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”—and I am the worst of them all. 16 But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life.*

Leaders are thankful for grace. Paul shares this and personalizes it. He doesn’t hide how he got to where he is, and he has plenty of reasons to be ashamed of his life. Instead, he puts it out there. God saves sinners!

Do you believe this? Most religions say God saves good people. If you do enough, God will be kind to you. If you serve enough, God will love you. If you obey enough, you will get salvation.

But Christianity saves sinners. This is good news, but most of us blanch at naming ourselves among the sinners. We want God to save polite people. Or talented people. Or virgins. Or Republicans only. Or people with the right outlook on X problem.

⁹ Wright, 16-17

¹⁰ Brian Ragan, found in Ryken, p. 19

¹¹ Ryken, 22

But God says he saves sinners. And Paul says in that category of sinner, he is the foremost of them all. I'd have to disagree with Paul. I think Paul is wrong here. I would say at the top, or at the bottom of sinners is – me. My heart is black and filled with sin. I do not deserve to be a Christian, nor do I deserve to be a pastor. I have no right to either.

And yet God saves sinners, of whom I am the most. If you are a Christian, you should be able to say the very same thing, for you know your own heart and none others.

Jesus didn't come into the world to save sinners in general. He came to save me and you in particular. This is a universal truth applied to a specific situation. Universal offer. Individual acceptance. It will do you know good to believe that Jesus came to save sinners if you don't believe that pertains to *you*.

Are you a sinner? This verse is actually a hopeful thing to know if you are a sinner, for Christ Jesus came to the world to save sinners. Christianity is for bad people. Other religions say you can be good enough for God. Christianity offers real hope for the wretched.

God made an example out of Paul. But it was an example of grace and mercy. You should think that, if God could save someone like *that*, then he can save even me. Then you start to realize that if God can save someone like me, then he can surely save someone else. There are no impossible cases, because they are all impossible. God isn't looking for good people. If you think you are good, then you are in trouble. God gives grace and mercy to sinners. That means there is hope for you. There is hope for me.

What does this do for you? Does it make you beg for his mercy and forgiveness, for his grace? Do you see yourself in need like this? Are you the worst of sinners?

If you aren't a Christian, then you are probably bored or annoyed with all this talk of sin and forgiveness. You'll want me to get to another topic.

But if you are a Christian, your heart should leap when I speak of these things. How deep the Father's love for us! How vast beyond all measure! That he should give his only Son to make a wretch a treasure!

That is what Paul thinks. He breaks out into a doxology. He cannot keep his eyes on himself or his testimony. "There comes a time to leave off praising God for what he has done in your life and simply to praise him for who he is in himself."¹²
17 All honor and glory to God forever and ever! He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen.

When we think of how God has saved us, we are not filled with pride or arrogance of what we have done or what we have deserved. We think of God himself, and his honor and his glory forever.

Paul expresses this in his praise to the:

Eternal King – God is the king of the past, present and future. Who else can make that claim? Have you heard people say or seen the bumper sticker that says, "God is my copilot?" Um, that is not even close to being the truth. You will crash, because you'll want to take over way too much control. God is the Eternal King over all things.

Immortal King – God is incorruptible. There is no "best-used-by" date. He is imperishable. The world is running down. We're running out of energy. It's in the news all the time. Your body is running down. I'm getting old and grey hairs. You will too. There is corruption, but God is not eroding. He conquered death. He is immortal.

Invisible King – In the children's catechism, my children are asked, "Can you see God?" And they answer "I cannot see God, but he can always see me." This may be the most frustrating of the qualities here, but it speaks of his amazingness. If God were to be seen, how would he show himself? Would he always be changing so that we wouldn't latch onto any one things? This is one of the reasons we are told not to make images of him. Invisible does not equal unknowable. It means without limits, without boundaries. Do you want to see God? We can see his son. See Jesus.

Only King – God is incomparable and unique. He has no rivals. Nothing compares to him. You shall have no other gods before him. Not sex. Not grades. Not marriage. Not internships. Not med school. Not security. Not control. Nothing. He is the only king for you.

It is of these qualities we sing when we sing Walter Chalmers Smith's song:

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great Name we praise.*

Honor and glory forever and ever. Give him his due. Songs, praises, lives. Amen – let it be.

Leaders are thankful. Are you thankful? We should exhibit thankfulness for serving in any and every area. For stuffing envelopes, folding laundry, driving people around, chalking.

But we get tired of ministry, of leading a Bible study. We think God should thank us for our spiritual service. Too proud to be grateful. We complain about having to serve God. We have proud instead of humble hearts. We are so often driven to be recognized and appreciated or thrilled to be used at all and eager for others to get the credit. Paul wasn't bashful, but always humble of his personal unworthiness.

¹² Ryken, 32

Thomas Bilney read the Bible and was converted. What was the passage he was reading? This one. 1 Tim. 1:15 changed his life.

“But at last, he wrote, I heard speak of Jesus, even then when the New Testament was first set forth by Erasmus... And at the first reading (as I well remember) I chanced upon this sentence of St. Paul (O most sweet and comfortable sentence to my soul!) in 1 Timothy 1. ‘It is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be embraced, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am the chief and principal.’ This one sentence, through God’s instruction and inward working, which I did not then perceive, did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that even immediately I seemed unto myself inwardly to feel a marvelous comfort and quietness, insomuch that ‘my bruised bones leaped for joy’ (Psalm 51). After this, the Scripture began to be more pleasant unto me than the honey of the honey comb...”¹³

Do you hear the passion in Bilney’s writing? Do you sense the awe and wonder that he could be saved?

It brings to mind another more famous man, John Newton. Newton was a slave trader in the 1700s who was converted and became an Anglican priest. He wrote hymns. Once, reflecting on the Old Testament text he was to preach on, and thinking of his life as a slave trader, he wrote:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost and now I’m found. Was blind, but now I see.

You know that hymn of course. It is a great one. Did you know that some people are changing the line “that saved a wretch like me” to “that saved and set me free.” It seems like wretch doesn’t hit too high in the popularity polls.

Don’t be fooled. Yes it is a lot the same sentiment. But you need to see yourself a wretch, the worst of sinners. Then you can be saved.

That is amazing grace. I want us to have a culture where we fight the good fight, where we hate objectively and lovingly well, where we stand for and against the correct things, and where we have a celebration at seeing God at work in the lives of his broken, crazy, needy, messed up people. Where we see ourselves as real sinners. Bad ones. But we rejoice at God’s work of amazing grace in our lives together. That means we have to share our sin and share his forgiveness and redemption. That means we have to believe the gospel.

¹³ From Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, found in Stott, 54