

“THIS IS WAR”

1 Timothy 1:18-20

Dr. John Crocker, Crossroads Church, Albert Lead, MN. April 17-18, 2010

I heard something many years ago that I won't forget: *For Christians this world is not a playground; it's a battlefield!*

That's worth remembering and repeating every day!

· I read in the news this week that the night life for expatriates living in Kabul, the Afghan capital is lively and exciting. The mostly single foreign contract workers there are highly paid. They party heartily in a huge variety of restaurants and bars that have been set up to give them somewhere to spend their money. But this is all done behind 20 ft. tall blast walls with an outer perimeter of armed Afghan security guards because of the constant threat of suicide bombers.

They're trying to make the battlefield a playground, but it doesn't work very well or for very long.

· I won't quarrel with anyone who claims the Christian life is a party. You can make a biblical case for it. In one of Jesus' parables a father threw a lavish party for his reprobate son who repented and came home. It's one in a trilogy of parables that tell us when a sinner repents there is rejoicing in heaven (Luke 15:7, 10). That's where the party happens—in heaven.

The Bible does urge Christians to rejoice. We are to have joy even in adversity, and we can rejoice because there is more to life than the things of this world. *Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven* (Matthew 5:12); *Be joyful in hope* (Romans 12:12); *Rejoice in the Lord always* (Philippians 3:1; 4:2). We rejoice in God's grace and in the assurance that we belong to him and are protected by him.

But if Christians try to make this world their party central, it's not long before something blows up in their face to disabuse them of that notion.

· We're living in a war zone. On the cross Christ won the victory over our enemy the devil. But he has not yet been expelled from the world where we live. He's on the loose.

The Apostle John helped his readers understand this, *We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of (lies in) the evil one.* (1 John 5:19)

The Apostle Peter warned Christians: *Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.* (1 Peter 5:8).

We are not in this world to have perpetual fun with earthly delights and material possessions. God's truth blasts that notion to smithereens. Our joy is not grounded in this world

· The war motif is quite prominent in the New Testament. Why are we in this war?

Christ has given his followers something precious to guard. It's worth fighting for. It is the target of our enemy's attention.

What is it? It's the gospel, the good news of forgiveness of sin and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul calls it *the good deposit* in his second letter to Timothy:

'What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you--guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.' (2 Timothy 1:13, 14)

We're living in a danger zone; that's why we have to guard this priceless treasure, the gospel.

· It's a pastor's responsibility to care for the souls of people (Hebrews 13:17). The only way to do this is by holding onto this 'sound teaching', or gospel of Jesus Christ. You must expect this of your pastor.

This is a pastor's priority. If it isn't, then he is not a true pastor; he's just a religious practitioner.

Our enemy the devil is intent on destroying the good news of Jesus Christ. Jesus called the devil the *father of lies* (John 8:44). He is the author of the false teaching that may invade a church. (1:3)

You have all the armor you need for the war. Paul told the Ephesian Christians:

'Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the devil's schemes.' (Ephesians.6:10-11)

One item of our armor is called the *belt of truth* (Eph. 6:14).

· I think I've said enough to persuade anyone who believes the Bible that we're in a spiritual war zone.

In the Bible text we'll study today the Apostle Paul told Timothy the pastor, *'Fight the good fight of the faith.'* (He wrote the same thing in chapter 6:12).

18. *Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight,*

19. *holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith.*

20. *Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.*

We can't ignore this war motif in Scripture.

A few years after this, when Paul contemplated his death, he wrote, *'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.'* (2 Timothy 4:7)

· Someone may say: *This is not what I expect in a church. I don't want a church that's fighting a war. I want a church that feels safe and warm--a refuge, a shelter.*

Me too! Actually the church is a refuge for the wounded and the weary, but it's still in the middle of a spiritual war. There is no escaping it.

The church is like a M*A*S*H (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) unit in a combat zone—a unit where we find rest and healing, and from which we are re-deployed into the spiritual war around us.

· Let's see what the Apostle Paul told Pastor Timothy about this war.

In 1 Timothy 1:18-20 the Apostle Paul gives some excellent reasons why Christians must get serious about living in a war zone.

I. IT'S A WORTHY WAR. 1 Timothy 1:18

You've heard the pundits' arguments about whether the wars in Afghanistan or in Iraq are worthy wars. Is the enormous cost of human life and dollars justified?. Some want to pull out the US troops immediately.

· The Apostle Paul says about this spiritual war, *Don't pull out, and don't capitulate to the enemy!*

18. *Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight,*

The last clause reads literally, *'wage the good warfare.'*

· Over the years I've seen some church folk prepare for war over the most unworthy, worthless issues.

Do you remember the Y2K scare at the turn of the millennium? Much ado about nothing! One dumb cluck in the church installed a huge power generator at his house, fortified his basement to store a ton of food, and got an arsenal of weapons to fight a war that never happened. What a dolt!

He wasn't alone. A lot of Christians got pulled into that nonsense. And now they pretend it never happened.

· This war that Paul talks about is not a worthless war!

It's a battle for the gospel. The eternal welfare of people is at stake.

Paul reminds Timothy of his calling. It wasn't a career choice; it was a divine calling. It was *'according to the prophecies concerning you.'* (v.18)

· By nature Timothy was timid, so Paul exhorted him to fight against the false teachers who would expel the true gospel from the church.

He told Timothy: *'This is a hill you must be willing to die on. Fight the good fight.'*

· So is this only for pastors, like Timothy?

No. The whole church is on a spiritual battlefield. We are Christian soldiers.

It is said that D.L. Moody didn't like his song leader Ira Sankey to use the popular gospel song, *'Onward, Christian Soldiers'* in his gospel campaigns. That's because Moody felt the church was a poor excuse for an army.

The devil attacks with a huge arsenal of lies—lies that faith in Christ alone isn't enough; lies that you won't go to heaven unless you obey a set of rules. These are attacks against the central truths of the gospel.

Lots of church folk get caught in that trap of the enemy's lies so that they're never sure of their salvation. They are filled with doubts and fears that their sins aren't really forgiven, that their faith in Jesus Christ isn't enough.

That's why we fight the good fight. Don't run from it. It's a worthy war. The spiritual destiny of people is at stake.

II. IT'S A RIGHTEOUS WAR. 1 Timothy 1:19a

Further on in this letter Paul alerts Pastor Timothy, *'Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.'* (1 Timothy 4:1-2)

When your opponents are insincere liars whose consciences are seared, the way to overcome their lies is with sincerity and integrity.

1:19a *'... holding faith and a good conscience.'*

This is how to face our enemy. It's about a person's character.

Character is who you are when no one is watching.

Will Rogers said, *'Live in such a way that you wouldn't be afraid to sell the family parrot to the town gossip.'*

It's our character and integrity that authenticates the Christian faith before a watching world. Be genuine.

The historian Arnold Toynbee said, *'Most people don't reject Christianity, but a poor caricature of it.'*

Pastors and teachers in a church must preach and teach the pure gospel--the *real thing*. Not some twisted *caricature* of Christianity.

Isn't that what false teaching is? It's a distortion of the gospel truth of the Christian faith.

That's what the false teachers promoted. They had *thrust away from* (v.19 *rejected*) faith and a good conscience.

But they still came to the meetings. They were very religious.

· We have to *hold on to faith and a good* conscience.

We don't capitulate to the lies of the enemy.

We're in a fight over what is right and true. It's all about the good news of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

It's a righteous war. As a church we must allow nothing to displace or distort the gospel.

III. IT'S A PERILOUS WAR. 1 Timothy 1:19b-20

There is great risk of spiritual wreckage.

1:19b,20: *Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.*

Even though Paul was hundreds of miles away, he knew what Hymenaeus and Alexander were up to.

They had literally *pushed away* (v.19) the faith and a good conscience.

They stayed active in the church, but they shoved their conscience into a corner where it didn't interfere with what they're doing.

· Hymenaeus was clearly a pain in the neck (and probably somewhere else too) for Paul. In his second letter to Timothy Paul warns that the heresy about the resurrection that Hymenaeus was teaching was spreading like gangrene in the church. (2 Timothy 2:17)

That's sick! Paul warned Timothy to watch out for Hymenaeus. His lies could cause the church, the body of Christ, to rot.

· This other villain, Alexander, may be the same jerk Paul tells us about in 2 Timothy 4:14—'*Alexander the coppersmith (metal worker) did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds.*'

We can't be absolutely certain it's the same person because Alexander was a popular name in the Greek culture. But I doubt that two different nincompoops who hassled Paul would have the same name.

· Did you catch how resolute Paul was in dealing with these renegade teachers?

If you're in a war, gentleness won't help you much.

In a war you sometimes have to use bunker-busting bombs.

You never, never, show any compassion to someone whose goal is to destroy the faith of believers in the church.

Gentleness is for the lambs in God's flock, not for the predatory wolves that plunder God's flock.

We must always be patient and gentle with Christians who are struggling with sin. They are lambs going astray.

Hymenaeus and Alexander were not lost lambs; they were ferocious wolves!

· Paul identified these two troublemakers by name and he handed them over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

Paul exercised the same extreme action with an unrepentant man who was causing rot in the church at Corinth: *'You are to deliver this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.'* (1 Corinthians 5:5) That man was being sexually intimate with his stepmother (or perhaps his own mother) and the church had become so rotten at the core that the members were proud of their open-mindedness in accepting it!

· This is one of the most important principles every church must put into practice: Always be patient and gentle with struggling sinners. But with someone who refuses to repent and pollutes the church, you're in a war!

Why is this so very important? Paul cited a familiar proverb, *'Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?'* (1 Corinthians 5:6) If you accommodate lies of wickedness in one person in the church, you will ultimately destroy the whole church!

· Frankly, most churches today are afraid to take the kind of action Paul took. They use excuses like, *'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone; what right do we have to judge?'*

If you don't deal with pernicious sinful behavior and heretical teaching you welcome into the church the lie that you can do whatever you want and believe whatever you want, and still be a Christian.

That's laying out the red carpet for the devil who is the father of lies. He sets up housekeeping and soon he controls the church.

Paul threw out the bad batch of leaven before it could destroy the church spiritually.

· What happens if you let go of faith and a good conscience? Paul says spiritual shipwreck happens.

With the advent of Global Positioning Systems, lighthouses have pretty much become nautical dinosaurs. But not too long ago, if lighthouses weren't working, shipwrecks happened.

'A fallen lighthouse is more dangerous than a reef.' (Charlie Willey)

I think this is what Paul had in mind when he when he used the shipwreck metaphor.

Keep the light of truth blazing brightly in the church, so that people don't go off course and become shipwrecked.

· Hymenaeus and Alexander had deliberately turned away from the light and shipwrecked their faith.

So Paul said he had handed them over to Satan so that they might learn not to blaspheme. Wow! How did the Apostle Paul enter into such an arrangement that the devil would do his bidding?

It wasn't by Paul's own authority. He told the Corinthian church that when they exercised this kind of severe discipline in the church, they did it only in the power of the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 5:4)

· What does handing someone over to Satan mean?

Does it mean the person becomes the devil's property?

No. This was not punishment. Paul knew there was nothing he could do for a man who didn't want to be helped.

But God could use Satan to bring suffering to the false teacher so that he would repent and be saved.

· In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul confessed that God had used Satan in his life to keep him from becoming puffed up with pride because of the awesome visions God had chosen to reveal to him.

He said, *'To keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated.'* (2 Corinthians 12:7)

We don't know what this "thorn" was, but it kept Paul humble and therefore useful to God.

In the Old Testament we see this in the account of Job, whom God allowed to be harassed by Satan. In the end, after incredible suffering, Job had a much closer relationship with God and a greater understanding of God.

· So Paul's extreme act with regard to these two men was the final step in church discipline—and a last-ditch effort to rescue them from eternal ruin.

It wouldn't do them any good if they never had an opportunity to repent and be reconciled to the truth.

During the Civil War a young man named Roswell McIntyre was drafted into the New York Cavalry. In the heat of battle he panicked and deserted. He was arrested and court-martialed. The generals wanted to shoot him as an example to others. His mother appealed to President Lincoln for a second chance. Lincoln thought and prayed about it, then he wrote a famous statement: *I have observed that it never does a boy much good to shoot him.'* So McIntyre was reinstated. He later died in the battle of Little Five Forks, Virginia.

We're involved in a perilous war for the souls of people--to keep them from spiritual shipwreck. Sometimes it requires extreme action. We're not playing church.

We are living in a war zone.

To fight the good fight we have to hold onto the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ with a good conscience and never let go.

Is your life off-course? Maybe you've hit the rocks already and are shipwrecked--or you can see them coming and don't know how to avoid shipwreck.

I urge you, right now, to ask Christ to rescue you, turn your life around. Make something new and beautiful out of the shipwrecked pieces of your life.

God does that. That's the gospel truth!