

The Fight of Faith

A sermon in the series
What Faith Must Fight For

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I Timothy 6:12

Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Let me ask you this morning, have you learned to fight? We describe the Christian life in so many different ways, a life of joy, a life of peace, a life of charity or brotherly kindness, a life devoted to God. But among the many titles we use to describe our Christian existence, Paul adds one here in our text and he calls the Christian life a fight of faith.

If you are to follow the Lord Jesus Christ you must develop keen fighting skills. We're of course not talking about physical fighting for the Bible tells us we do not war against flesh and blood, physical beings, but against spiritual beings. Therefore our warfare is spiritual and we must learn how to fight accordingly. It boils down to a fight of faith. You need to learn how to take your faith and use it in the battle Paul calls the fight of faith.

Unfortunately, many Christians think of faith as something used at salvation and then put up in a trophy case. You ask them, "Do you have faith?"

"Oh yes," and they point to the trophy case and tell you they asked Jesus to come into their heart when they were 10 or 16 or 26.

"Do you have faith in God?"

"Yes, I told you I professed faith when ..." and they tell you the age.

They look at faith as something that happened the moment they were saved and now they've done that and they can set it aside and not worry about it any more because they've taken care of that. But faith is not something to be displayed like a trophy; it's something to be used. It's to be seen, not on a shelf, but rather in your life, day by day, trusting God for the grace to serve Him. Your faith is to be present and it is to be active. So I say to us today, don't think possessing faith is all that is necessary. Yes, you possess it, but now you must use it and you need to know how to use it well. Faith must be fought for.

You must fight against anything that resists what God has said. You have to learn how to take your faith and resist every emotion, every devil, every thought that sets itself up against God. And if you don't fight you will be beaten because the enemy will not cease to fight just because you do. When it comes to your salvation and your spiritual survival you must fight. Otherwise you have no chance.

What I want to do in this new series is explain the theaters in which we are to fight the fight of faith. There are several different military theaters in which this fight exists and we will name them this morning and then we will look at each one in strategic detail according to our war manual, the Word of God.

Believer, today let me exhort you to pick up the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit and let us do battle.

I pray your heart is weary with your spiritual failures. I mean that. I pray that you have failed enough that now you are ready to fight the fight of faith. What do I mean by that? There's an advantage of getting older, at least one, and this is the advantage—the longer that I have served Him; the more I have failed Him. And it's my failures that have taught me that I am insufficient, unable, not having the wherewithal to live for Jesus and I have learned that Jesus is more than enough. He is plenty; He is sufficient to maintain my cause. I have learned through repeated failures and trying to live the Christian life, trying to minister to others, and serve Him in the capacity to which He's called me, that I need Him more and more. I've come to the point of desperation, and having come to the place of desperation and I can truly be dependent upon God.

I am thankful for every one of my failures because my failures have shown me that my weaponry is inadequate for the battle of faith. The Bible says my weapons are not carnal, but they are spiritual in pulling down strongholds. What does that mean? I believe you will never know what it means until you have failed sufficiently in trying to fight against the flesh and the devil and the world. You will never pick up the spiritual weaponry; you will depend upon your own strength, our own wisdom and your own determination. Therefore I am thankful for my failures because they have taught me that I am in Christ and in Him alone. And in Christ alone is all I need and by faith in Him, I overcome.

I. TO HAVE FAITH REQUIRES A COST

If faith had no price then it would be very easy. We wouldn't be talking about faith this morning, we would be talking about great and glorious and deeper subjects. But friends, there is a great price and I want to discuss with you, just for a few moments, about the cost of faith.

A. The Cost of Faith.

This is why it's a battle to maintain faith, there is a cost; and at the root of the cost of faith is self-denial. It's not fighting Satan or hell. I'm glad to fight against the enemy. He's my enemy and I don't like him. It's okay to not like the devil, did you know that? He's the one enemy you don't have to love. I don't have any affections and I don't feel sorry for him. I have no problem fighting the enemy, I joyfully want to see him put in his place. It will be worth getting into heaven just to watch the Father banish Satan to his place in the Lake of Fire. We will joyfully triumph in God's grace and victory, but the cost to me today is self-denial, there is where the battle rages.

The cost of faith will entail at least these six things:

1. Denial of self-trust.

If I am going to fight the fight of faith, I can't trust me because faith is to be in God, not Michael and not you. The fight of faith requires absolute rejection of trusting in you at all. Jesus said it this way in Matthew 16:24, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

This is the first step. It's not the cross; the first step is denial of self. What does that mean? It always means the same thing in every case—it means the denial of self-trust. Self-control is the whole issue here and this is why it's such a huge battle. I love to be in control. Don't sit there piously and think I'm the only one who has that problem. You love control too. You want to be in control of your life, your circumstances, your joy, your family, your home. If a problem arises you want to be on top of it. The very nature of the idiom "on top of it" suggests control.

We all want to be in control and Jesus comes to the very heart of the flesh, the very pride of man, and says if you're going to be My follower, if you're going to be a disciple of Mine you can no longer trust in yourself. You must abdicate, give up the control. That's a huge battle, and a cost I have to be willing to pay in order to be a Christian.

We are living in America, the land that was founded upon Gospel-principles. When our forefathers came to this continent, they came with a Bible in one hand and a prayer book in the other. They came with faith in the heart and now, more than 200 years later we have so drifted from that, that today to be a Christian simply means getting up somewhere and signing a card and saying "I've made a decision for Jesus Christ." To be a disciple today, according to the American church, means I've added Jesus to my life rather than surrender my life. There are so many deceived in our churches, including a lot of preachers, who believe the Christian life is Jesus helping them to manage their life. That's not the Christian life, that's the opposite of it. Jesus said deny yourself, and that is the cost of no longer trusting in yourself.

2. Deny yourself the right to follow your emotions.

The fight of faith is severe in this very category of emotions. Gentleman, we need not look at our wives and say that's a female problem. We need to take stock today and acknowledge that we

have an emotional side as well as they do; we've learned how to become calloused and to hide it, but it's still there. Men feel and they feel deeply, just like women. Maybe not the same way and for the same reasons, but we feel and have emotions. And there is nothing more difficult than saying to your emotions, "Emotions, thoughts, feelings, you are a lie. What you are suggesting is not the truth, this is not what the Bible says is true about me; it's not true about my circumstances, and it's not true about God."

How many of you have ever felt as if God had abandoned you? We've all felt at some point that God has departed. What do you do with that emotion? The fight of faith requires you to say *no* to that emotion. You have to recognize it as the enemy, that part of you resisting against faith, resisting trusting in the Lord with all your heart, and instead wanting to lean on your own understanding and not acknowledge God in all of your ways. That emotion will carry you like the tides of the ocean and it will take you further and further away from the truth of God's shore. The cost is to battle against your own issues. You can't trust in yourself and you can't abide by your own emotions.

3. Deny yourself the right of self-pity.

With the aforementioned emotions comes another emotion: feeling sorry for yourself. It's more than just an emotion; it's a state of mind. Emotions are involuntary, meaning, you don't say "I'm going to feel sad today," or "I'm going to feel happy today," or "I'm going to feel elated," or "I'm going to feel powerful today," it just doesn't work that way. Other things create the feelings you have. Ninety percent of the time it's what you think and this produces a mindset of self-pity. The fight of faith comes against your right of self-pity. It battles back the emotion that says, *God has left me. I pray and my prayers are not being answered. I find it difficult to even pray.* But if you do not fight it, then with time you begin to feel sorry for yourself and the trajectory is that you pass that on to somebody else. When someone doesn't look at you or speak to you or say hello at church you automatically assume they don't like you because you're so full of self-pity that you conclude no one likes you. Friends, it takes faith to fight that because faith has the answer to the spirit of self-pity.

4. Deny yourself the right of vengeance.

That's the cost of the fight of faith because faith says you are to trust God in the hour of persecution or harm. The whole spirit of vengeance is the spirit of trying to be God and dole out His justice for Him. God says, *You have to say no to yourself. You don't have the right to dispense justice, I will, and I will do it right in My own time.*

The story of Corrie ten Boom is an amazing one. Corrie and her sister, Betsie, were arrested by the Nazis and placed in a concentration camp. They were natives of Holland and had been housing Jews secretly from the Nazis, but were caught, arrested and her whole family was deported. She and her sister went to a camp called Ravensbrück.

Before the end of the war, Corrie ten Boom was miraculously set free, it's a miracle in itself and worth reading the book *The Hiding Place*. Her sister didn't make it out physically, as she died months before Corrie ten Boom's release. God called Corrie to share her testimony and she became a noted speaker. In 1947 she was speaking in Munich, Germany when she saw him. I want to read to you in her own words what happened when she saw one of her ex-captors.

“It was in a church in Munich that I saw him—a balding, heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear. It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown. ‘When we confess our sins,’ I said, ‘God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. ...’

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: “A fine message, Fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!”

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

“You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,” he was saying, “I was a guard there.” No, he did not remember me.

“But since that time,” he went on, “I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well.

Fräulein,” again the hand came out—“will you forgive me?”

And I stood there—I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven—and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses,” Jesus says, “neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. “... Help!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then.

That was a fight of faith played out before us through the pen of Corrie ten Boom. I am not just asking if you can believe God to save you from your sins, can you believe God that you can be Christ-like and forgive your enemies?

5. Denial of lusts.

This is where the fight of faith will rage deep within your soul. There are many things we desire that are not Christ-like or good. Sometimes if they are good they are not the best and we have

to say no to the temptation of fulfilling the desires of this mortal body and mind. The fight of faith will cost you something—you'll have to say no. No to that shopping spree, no to yourself and not retaliate but love your wife when she does not give you the respect you believe you deserve. Guys, faith must say no to the computer screen when the lust is raging and you want to go somewhere to satisfy it. That's the cost. You can't always do what you want.

6. Persecution--rejection by others.

You have to be willing to be rejected if you're going to live by faith, because to live by faith is to live by God's control. We're living in a world that is anti-Christ and here we are living by the principles of Christ, by His life in us, the hope of glory. Do you think you're going to go through this world unscathed and nobody bother you? No. The rejection of others will lead to many other hardships. You may even have to lose your job because you're the only Christian there. Are you willing to endure that? That's the cost the fight of faith will require.

II. FAITH'S ENEMIES

- 1. Self**
- 2. Satan**
- 3. World**

Let me tell you once again, I'm not half as concerned about the last two as I am the first one, self. Wherever I go my enemy is, and it's me. That's the enemy to faith.

III. THE THEATER OF BATTLE

There are severe enemies who, if allowed, will destroy your faith and they do attack. Friends, there is no room for pacifism here. Pacifism is the belief in non-violence, no fighting, no striking back, not even in self-defense. There is no room for pacifism in the fight of faith, you had better fight or you'll be destroyed. You cannot go unscathed or unmolested. I want to give you the six areas in which the battle of faith will play out in your life.

I. Faith must fight to believe that Jesus satisfied the justice of God in his death and thereby you are forever justified.

This is a huge battle that needs to be won in each of your hearts. Some of you have not won that theater. We're going to deal with each one of these separately and this will be, Lord willing, next Sunday's message, but let me say this briefly—the blessed doctrine of justification is the fuel for your sanctification and growth in holiness. It is the very thing I keep running back to constantly and I fight the fight to believe that it's true. Faith must believe this man, Jesus of Nazareth, died 2,000 years ago, and by His death satisfy all of God's justice against my sins so that God the Father holds nothing against me. He held all against His Son and He paid it all.

That's the thing I have to fight more than any other area I'm going to give you.

I have to fight this so often because I want to live by my performance. It's how I've been all of my life. As an ambitious young man I wanted to be the top of the class, I wanted to be the best athlete, I wanted to be the best at whatever I did, and why? I can tell you why now looking back. I was trying to prove to myself that I was somebody. I didn't like me and the only way I could like me is if everybody else did. And for 26 years it kept me from Calvary because I believed God couldn't even love me until I had performed to a certain degree, then God could give me His grace. But listen to me, you can be saved and still battle in this area, in fact, many Christians are battling in this area and we'll deal with that next week, Lord willing.

2. Faith must believe that when I confess my sins I am forgiven and there is nothing remaining for me to do.

You must believe this, my dear church. I know some of you are thinking, "Well, that sounds like sin doesn't matter and we can simply go to God and ask for forgiveness and it's no big deal." No, not at all! That is not what I'm saying. Only those who are religious but lost, only those who are not true converts would listen to that and try to make it a license to sin and not grow in holiness. But the true child of God will hear the love of God in the cross and want to be more holy than ever, not more sinful. You have to understand that when you ask God, "He is faithful and just to forgive you and cleanse you of all unrighteousness. I write these things," says John, "that you may not sin, but if any man sins, he has an advocate with the Father, Christ Jesus the righteous."

3. Faith must fight to believe that God is always with me. The result of that will be to know that I am constantly loved by God, cared for, never alone, and have all I need.

That's a huge battle in itself—to believe that God never leaves you and that He's always with you. I will need to spend some time on this when we get to this and teach us how to cultivate that belief. What I will teach is how you fight the fight of faith in this matter. You have to start learning how to think and use your mind repeatedly until it becomes a way of life. We will go through all of this in that message. The greatest help I have learned in the last several years, probably since 2005 is this lesson of the ever-abiding presence of God. I'll never forget struggling one Saturday morning in prayer. I had been praying for about an hour and a half and God didn't seem to be anywhere. An hour and a half and I'm still on my face at the altar, crying, "Where are You God, where are You, Lord?" God taught me that day how to fight the fight of faith to believe that His presence is always with me. I'll share this in that message.

4. Faith must fight to believe God for the grace to overcome flesh sin and the world. In other words, it must fight to believe that Jesus Christ is my sanctification.

What does that mean? It means that God didn't save you, forgive you, and wipe out your past so

that from now on you live a better and nicer life. God has saved you so that He can continue to transform you and finally conform you to the image of His Son, and it's only through the Gospel that we are sanctified. We'll unpack that more in that message, so if you have any interest in fighting the fight of faith for your sanctification and growing in grace, you'll have to come back.

5. Faith must fight to believe in the integrity of God that all things will work to my good.

Some of you have recently gone through some of those battles where God pressed you and put you through the fire. He was not being very gentle with you and it hurt and it was hard but you came out more gleaming. More sparkling. More trusting. Because you learned that no matter what God does, it's always for your good. It doesn't mean everything God does feels good or even is good but it is for your good. There is a fight to believe that and we'll get into that.

6. Faith must fight to believe all of God's promises.

You have to believe the promises of God. You don't always open your Bible, read a promise of God and automatically have the faith to believe. Faith has to be cultivated and we will share with you how that is done.

As I bring this message to a conclusion, the fight of faith is a fight for truth. It always is. The fight of faith is a fight for the truth. The battle is not how much faith you have. If you leave here today saying this is going to be six or seven sermons about how much faith I have, you've missed it. It has nothing to do with how much faith you have. I believe what Jesus said that faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. It's not the size; rather it's the quality. But more than that, it's about truth. The fight of faith is "Can I believe the truth or not?" There is the fight. There is the struggle. Is the truth, the truth and can I believe it or not?

I want to speak to the skeptic this morning. You may have heard somebody present the Christian life like this, "Oh you've just got to take that blind leap." It isn't a blind leap into the dark, rather it's a leap into the light. Truth is the light. God does not ask you to check your intellect at the door in order to believe Him, the Christian faith is based upon truth. Truth. God's truth! And God's truth is evidential, meaning it is provable. Not only this, but much of moral truth is also self-evident, everybody can understand it.

I'll never forget a discussion group we were having in a downtown coffeehouse. We were trying to reach out to groups of people and we had a discussion one night on absolutism and morality. Is there absolute truth? We were surrounded by post-modernists who say, "No, there is no absolute truth. Truth is what you want it to be for you." We had a discussion with one young man and he left quickly because he could see that his theory of absolutes was absolutely wrong. But there were a few men who stayed and one in particular, a younger man I would say in his late thirties, who hardly said a word that night. Cool, almost too cool and calculated. As I tried to discuss with him I saw quickly what the problem was. I asked him, not thinking he'd be honest,

“Sir, it seems to me that you choose not to believe in absolute truth, right and wrong, black and white, because it’s easier to live in your indefinite grey. You can do whatever you want and your conscience won’t bother you. Am I right?” He smiled and said, “Yes, that’s exactly right. I choose not to believe because I want to be able to lay down my head at night and be okay.”

You see, to follow the world you have to check your brains out at the door. You have to reject self-evident truth. I’m not asking anybody to believe in fairy tales or myths or legends, I’m asking you to believe in the One who puts breath in your lungs and keeps your heart beating. I’m asking you to believe in the truth you know is true. You’re born with it and the only way you can deny it is to suppress it, reject it, and to ignore it. That is the truth—He is God and He is God Almighty and one day you must bow the knee to Him. Oh, that you would believe the truth and leap into its light.

There was a song written several years ago that talked about a man wandering through a desert with bottles of water on his shoulders. He conserved his water carefully, but finally it was all gone and he was still in the desert. His thirst got deeper and deeper until he saw a pump ahead and ran to it. It was not a mirage, an illusion or a trick of the mind, it was a true, living pump. He pulled the handle and pushed it down and with that motion he heard metal grinding on metal. No water came out. He started to panic and then he saw a tin can at the bottom of the pump and in the tin can was this message.

“Dear traveler, do not despair there is enough water here, just follow the instructions. Lift the handle up on the pump, bring it down and when you hear the sound of metal on metal discouraging you, here is what you do. Under the pump in front of you, buried in the sand there is a bottle of water. Do not despair, pick up the bottle of water, pour it into the cylinder and start priming the pump, a rush of water will start gushing out of the pump and you can drink all the water you want. Fill all your bottles but do not forget to fill up the bottle again and leave it for the next passerby. WARNING: You’re going to be tempted when you see this one bottle of water to drink it, but you’ll be so thirsty again and so will everyone else who goes by. Empty it out as instructed and you will have all the water you want and so will everybody else going by.”

That’s the fight of faith illustrated for us this morning. With every challenge to your faith there seems to be an easier way than faith. Always. *Just drink the bottle of water—just thank God for the miracle and go on.* That’s how the deception will rationalize and justify unbelief.

The question is will you believe the instructions? Are they true? Will they work? Are you willing to take the chance and pour out the water on the metal pump and there be no water at all or will you believe the instructions?

Friends, God has given us His Word, His Truth and at times it doesn’t make sense. Sometimes it seems too risky to trust God. *You mean if I trust God like this with my life that I will be filled with joy? He might send me to Africa!* But just like the instructions, if you do what it says you’ll have more than you need, and you will spill out onto others and give them refreshment. When you come

up against Christ He offers you that drink, that living water to free you to be exactly what He designed you to be. Not to be enslaved by the moment. The fight of faith asks you to believe, not just for the moment, but for the long haul.

If you empty your life on yourself you are soon going to be thirsty again. Indulge your idols and you'll be thirsty again and you won't be able to help anyone else who comes along behind you. But if you take what Jesus gives you and do what He says, pour it out so your life can now be filled with water constantly flowing, your life can also touch everybody else's life with meaning and fullness. Will you believe that? Let us, as Paul exhorts Timothy, fight the good fight of faith. Amen