**GOSPEL CULTURE IN GOD’S HOUSEHOLD**

**THE CHRISTIAN’S CALL TO FLEE AND FIGHT**

**1 Timothy 6:11-16**

**INTRODUCTION**

We are nearing the end of our study of 1 Timothy and our series called “Gospel Culture in God’s Household”. The Apostle Paul is about to give Timothy some final instructions and warnings regarding his calling as a pastor, and as we will see, he doesn’t say anything that he hasn’t said already. Instead, he chooses to once again emphasize the necessity of watching his life, and watching his doctrine.

That’s what this letter has been about. That’s what living as a Christian is about. It’s about living like Christ, and believing in Christ’s teaching. Or to borrow Paul’s language in this letter, it’s about growing in godliness and guarding the faith. Orthodoxy (sound doctrine) and orthopraxy (sound living) are equally important, and they are meant to be experienced and nurtured in the context of the local church.

That’s why we’ve been talking so much about “gospel culture”. We’re trying to figure out what it looks like for the gospel to not only transform lives, but to transform a community. We aren’t just meant to be a collection of individual Christians who are all reading the Bible by themselves, praying by themselves, and evangelizing by themselves. We are to read *together*. We are to pray *together*. We are to evangelize *together*. The gospel changes the way that we live *together*.

In the very first sermon in this series, I included a quotation from Ray Ortlund that has profoundly shaped my vision for our church. He writes:

“When the doctrine is clear and the culture is beautiful, that church will be powerful. But there are no shortcuts to getting there. Without the doctrine, the culture will be weak. Without the culture, the doctrine will seem pointless.” – Ray Ortlund

That’s what we’re aiming for here at Sovereign Grace. We’re aiming for clear doctrine that creates a beautiful culture so that we might be a powerful church to the glory of God. That’s why we need to watch our doctrine, and that’s why we need to watch our lives.

The title of this sermon is **The Christian’s Call to Flee and Fight**

We will have three points today:

1. The Commandment (v. 11-12)
2. The Charge (v. 13-15a)
3. The King of Kings (v. 15b-16)

(1) **THE COMMANDMENT**

Earlier in Chapter 6, Paul warned Timothy of the dangers of worldliness. The “desire to be rich”, and the “love of money” had led some to fall into temptation and into the devil’s snare. Some had even wandered away from the faith. The problem for Timothy was that there were influential people in his church who were giving way to the same temptation to love money more than they loved God, and as a result, they were on the lookout for what was new and exciting rather than what was true. .

But Timothy had to be different. He couldn’t fight fire with fire by imitating their tactics. Instead, he was to *flee*:

**11**But as for you, O man of God, flee these things.

Verse 11 says, “But as for you, O man of God, flee these things.” Timothy was to run away from these temptations like a man who was escaping from danger. He was to look at what these false teachers were doing and bolt off in the opposite direction. He was to be like Joseph when he was being tempted by Potiphar’s wife. He didn’t talk to her. He didn’t try to persuade her that this wasn’t a good idea. He didn’t trust himself to rise above her seduction and not give in. Instead, he ran! He ran out of her presence and out of her house, not even pausing to retrieve the garment that he had left behind.

Joseph ran like a man whose life was in danger, because he knew the dangers of sin. Sin doesn’t just make you feel bad. It doesn’t just make you less spiritually mature. Sin kills the soul. It separates you from God. It hardens the heart so that the things you said you believed no longer matter to you.

If Christ means anything to us, then we will flee from what tempts us. We will flee from what leads us to sin, because it was our sin that sent Jesus to the cross. It was our sin that made him suffer and die and be abandoned by his Father. Those who love Christ and believe the gospel must flee from sin and temptation.

But that’s not all we must do. We must not only run *from* sin. We must run *to* righteousness.

**11**But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.

Verse 11 says that we are to *pursue* righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness. This is one of many of Paul’s “virtue lists”, a collection of virtues that are meant to characterize the Christian life. None of these lists are meant to be exhaustive. Rather, they are meant to give us a sampling of the kinds of qualities that we are to pursue.

The word “pursue” in verse 11 means to “follow in haste”, or to “aggressively chase after”. It’s the same word used for “persecute”. Imagine enemies of the gospel coming after us, relentless and undeterred. Imagine Paul himself before his conversion pursuing the early believers in Jerusalem and Damascus and throwing men and women into prison. That’s how we are to chase after these qualities, with the same zeal and passion.

We are to flee from sin, and we are to pursue righteousness, because if we don’t, we’re not going to make any progress. The Christian life isn’t just one of retreat. It’s one of pursuit. It’s not just about becoming less and less sinful. It’s about becoming more and more like Christ.

Philip Ryken reminds us of the dangers of missing this when he writes:

“If all we do is run away from one sin, we will run right into the arms of another.” – Philip Ryken

And so, we must pursue righteousness. Righteousness means doing what is right before the Lord. It is doing what is right, and loving what is right. It doesn’t matter if you’re in public or in private. You always strive to do what is righteous for righteous reasons.

We are to pursue godliness, which is one of Paul’s favourite words in this letter. We are to live peaceful and godly lives before our unbelieving neighbours. We are to train ourselves for godliness. We are to treasure godliness knowing that godliness with contentment is great gain. And we are to *pursue* godliness by pursuing God himself, because it’s only by knowing God that we will become like him.

We are to pursue faith and love, two qualities that always go together. Many assume that faith and love will just magically form in our hearts when in fact we are to pursue them. We are to chase after them relentlessly. We are to fight for faith, setting our minds on things that are above and not on things that are below. We are to live in the light of God’s promises instead of in the shifting shadows of our circumstances. We are to trust in the love of God that has been poured out to us in Jesus Christ, because that’s what makes us loving people. That’s how we come to love one another the same way Christ loved us.

Steadfastness is next on the list. We are to pursue the kind of character that makes us steadfast people: people who aren’t easily shaken; people who don’t give up on their convictions; people who keep walking on the straight and narrow path of following Christ without going to the left or to the right. And you know what the Bible says produces steadfastness? Our trials and suffering:

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” (James 1:2)

This doesn’t mean that we chase after suffering. But it does mean that we can rejoice in our suffering, because we know what it’s producing in us. It’s producing steadfastness, so that we might run the race of faith to the end.

The last quality on this list is gentleness. You might be surprised to find this quality on the list, because gentleness isn’t valued very much these days. But it is a crucial quality for the Christian. Jesus himself described himself as the one who was “gentle and lowly”, so if we are to become like Christ, we must become gentle. That doesn’t mean we become weak. There’s a difference between meekness and weakness. But it does mean that we are slow to anger, tender in our affections, welcoming to the weak, forgiving towards our enemies.

These are the qualities that we are meant to pursue, and these are the qualities that we have all failed to practice. No one is righteous all the time, godly all the time, walking by faith all the time, loving all the time, steadfast all the time, or gentle all the time. We don’t even pursue these qualities all the time. Instead of fleeing from sin and pursuing righteousness, we flee from righteousness and pursue sin. That’s how fallen we are. That’s how twisted our sinful hearts have become.

Only one man embodied these qualities perfectly. Only one man lived this way throughout his entire life. Jesus was righteous and godly. Jesus walked by faith and love. Jesus was steadfast till the end, even through the pain and suffering of the cross. Jesus was gentle even towards his enemies, teaching us to bless those who persecute us, and forgiving his tormentors as he hung on the cross.

Jesus embodied every single one of these qualities so that all who trust in him could have them as well. He died for our failings, but he also died so that we wouldn’t have to fail anymore. Those who have life *in* Jesus can have life *like* Jesus as well.

Up until now, Paul has been telling Timothy to watch his life. But now in verse 12 he tells him to watch his doctrine:

**12**Fight the good fight of the faith.

Verse 12 says he is to “fight the good fight of the faith”. “The faith” was one of Paul’s short forms for Christian beliefs. We are to walk by faith, and we are to believe in the faith. Indeed, we are to *fight* for the faith. The word for “fight” means to “struggle” or to “contend for a prize”. We are to strive after, labour for, and give our lives to the cause of preserving sound Christian doctrine and the heart of that doctrine which is the gospel.

There aren’t many things worth fighting for, but if anything is worth fighting for, it’s this. We must be willing to give our lives for the truths of the Christian faith, because salvation is found nowhere else. Everlasting life, fullness of joy, forgiveness of sins are found exclusively in the Christian faith. And so, if we are to take hold of these things, and if we are to offer them to a world full of lost people, we must fight the good fight of the faith.

**12**Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

That seems to be why Paul exhorts Timothy in the rest of verse 12 to “take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” When Timothy was either converted or baptized, he made a public confession of faith, a confession that Christ is Lord and Saviour, and that salvation is found in his name alone. What he first confessed, he must continue to confess. That’s what it means to take hold of eternal life. He is to take hold of the eternal life that is already his in Christ and to not let go until he has persevered to the end.

He will do that watching his life and his doctrine, by fighting for the faith and waging war against his sin.

(2) **THE CHARGE**

That’s the commandment. Paul has commanded him to watch his life and his doctrine, and it is a commandment that we have received as well. But now he gives him a sacred charge, leading to our second point.

**13**I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession,

Verse 13 begins with, “I charge you”, which was a way of ordering, commanding, or announcing that something needed to be done. He then emphasizes the sanctity of the command by adding “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus”. Paul reminds Timothy that this isn’t just a matter of an older pastor giving a younger pastor good advice. This is an authoritative instruction, and it’s one that is issued with the full backing of God. God the Father and God the Son are standing behind Paul’s words and watching Timothy to see how he responds. They are bearing witness to Timothy’s faithfulness. Nothing could press home the weightiness of the charge more than that.

But even so, Paul doesn’t leave Timothy without hope. He reminds him that God is the One “who gives life to all things”. God isn’t a passive observer waiting for the moment that Timothy fails. He is an active participant in supplying what Timothy lacks. God always provides what he commands, and Paul is confident that he will provide for Timothy.

He also reminds him that Christ Jesus appeared before Pontius Pilate and “made the good confession” himself. Just as Timothy “made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses”, Jesus Christ “made the good confession” before Pontius Pilate. He declared his lordship before the Roman governor, he testified that his kingdom was not of this world, and he revealed that even Pilate’s authority derived from his Heavenly Father.

In other words, Jesus isn’t calling Timothy to do anything that he wasn’t willing to do himself. Jesus made the good confession that he is the Lord, and it cost him his life. Now Timothy must be willing to do the same.

What is Paul charging Timothy to do?

**13**I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, **14**to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Look at verse 14. The charge is simply “keep the commandment”. Paul charges him, orders him, commands him to “keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ”. What Paul had just commanded in verses 11-12, he now charges Timothy in the presence of God and the Lord Jesus Christ to keep. The commandment to flee from sin, to pursue righteousness, to fight the good fight of the faith, and to take hold of the eternal life must remain “unstained and free from reproach” by Timothy’s obedience. It’s Timothy’s obedience that would uphold the integrity and beauty of God’s command, just as it would be Timothy’s disobedience that would make the commandment look foolish and futile.

Timothy is to keep the commandment, not just for a day or two, not just during work hours, but until the day that Christ returns. Only death or the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ will free him from this sacred charge to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach.

It’s a day that no one knows, which is why Paul adds that the day will be displayed “at the proper time”. Timothy isn’t to speculate as to when Jesus will return. He’s not to be like an impatient child repeatedly asking, “Are we there yet?” He is to put his head down, take one step at a time, and keep the commandment until Christ returns.

(3) **THE KING OF KINGS**

This leads to our final point.

When it comes to obeying God’s commands, it can be so easy to lose sight of God and focus on ourselves. We either become fixated on our failures or puffed up by our successes.

But here, Paul gives Timothy some perspective. He reminds him to lift up the eyes of his heart and gaze into heaven, so that he might remember who it is that he serves.

**15 …**he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, **16**who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

Verse 15 says that he is serving the “blessed and only Sovereign”. To be “blessed” is to be happy. To be “Sovereign” is to reign as the king. God is the “Happy King”, the one who rules over all and the one from whom all blessings and joys and happiness flows.

He is “the King of kings and Lord of lords”, the one who stands above all authority, reigning over the actions of all the kings and lords of the earth out of his sovereign rule and might.

He is the one “who alone has immortality”. Earlier in verse 13, Paul said that God “gives life to all things”, because he alone has life in himself. He doesn’t receive his life from any other being or source. He is the fountain of life. That is why he alone has immortality. He has always been, and he will always be, because life is found in him.

He “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.” This echoes Mount Sinai, when Israel was forbidden to approach the mountain of God on pain of death, and Moses was told, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” Even when Moses pleaded, “Please show me your glory”, the Lord still covered him with his hand as his glory passed by and the Lord proclaimed his Name. That God is Timothy’s God. The God of Moses, the God of Sinai, the God of Israel, is the God of Timothy, the one who “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.”

It is to this God that Paul ascribes “honour and eternal dominion”. This God, and this God alone, deserves to be worshipped and obeyed, forever and ever in the happy reign of his eternal dominion.

**CONCLUSION**

This is why we must keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach. The God who is the blessed and only Sovereign, who dwells in unapproachable light, whose purity is beyond our comprehension and perception, has commanded us to flee from sin, to fight for the faith, to pursue righteousness and take hold of eternal life. This is the God who will one day appear in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ when he returns to judge every one who has ever lived.

And so, we must flee from sin. This isn’t a category that many of us have. Forgiveness of sins we know, but fleeing from sin sounds strange. After all, won’t God just forgive us if we sin? Why flee when we have God’s forgiveness? That’s dangerous reasoning. It’s soul-condemning, unbiblical reasoning that has nothing to do with the Christian life. How can we who died to sin still live in it? We can’t, because those who have been washed by the blood of the Lamb have no desire to dive back into the sinful past that Christ has freed us from.

Those who truly belong to Christ will not presume on God’s forgiveness. Instead, they will devote themselves to putting their sin to death by the power of the Spirit, because nothing disgusts them more than the very sins that sent Jesus to the cross.

Others don’t flee from sin because they think it’s pointless. They think, “Well, it’s really a matter of the heart, isn’t it? What good will it be to flee from sin when my sinful heart is just going to draw me back to it?” This has the appearance of wisdom, but it’s utterly false. The Bible calls us to flee from sin *now* and not wait until we feel like it. Jesus used the radical imagery of cutting off hands and gouging out eyes that cause us to sin because continuing to sin is dangerous.

We must flee our sin, because it’s not just our hearts that affect our actions. It’s our actions that affect our hearts. Our actions aren’t just the result of our heart’s inclinations. Our heart’s inclinations are determined in part by our actions. Just look at what Jesus taught in Matthew 6. He says, “Don’t lay up treasures on earth, but lay up treasures in heaven.” Jesus is speaking about *actions*. *Don’t* do this. *Do* this instead. Why? “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

If you store up treasures on earth, then your heart will be here on earth. Your heart will follow your actions. That’s why Jesus doesn’t just say, “Wait for your heart to change and then store up treasures in heaven”. He says “Stop laying up treasures on earth, and start laying up treasures on heaven”, because if you do, your heart will follow. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

It’s true that sin has its roots in the heart, but we must never use this as an excuse to keep sinning. We need to stop making excuses for ourselves and start taking action. We can get so caught up in talking about our sin, analyzing our sin, probing what our sin reveals about our hearts, that we don’t do the one thing that God has told us to do. *Flee* from it. *Run* away from it. Cut off what causes you to sin. If you do, your heart will follow. Your heart will follow because that’s what Christ has promised to do. He has come to free us from the penalty of sin and the power of sin so that we would no longer be slaves of sin but slaves of righteousness.

Are there sins that you need to flee from? Are there temptations that you need to cut off? It could be the apps on your phone, or the shows on your TV, or the people you talk to at work. Whatever it is that tempts you to sin, you must flee.

And so, I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen.