

Choose to Fight the Good Fight

2 Timothy 4:1-8 (NIV)

¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. ⁶ For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

The other day I went to get our portable air compressor out of one of the floor compartments in our van. Before lifting up the compartment, I noticed that the floormat had been bunched up and wasn't laying flat. My first impulse was to fix it. Then the memories of how many other times I have tried to straighten this floormat came to mind. Even if I straightened it out again right now, it wouldn't remain that way. It was a losing battle. And it really only bugged me, no one else. It doesn't actually need to be straightened. So, I decided not to use my energy and time to fight that fight. It wasn't a good fight.

What are your floormat moments, times choosing what fights to fight? Is it keeping the house clean? Is it the pulling of the weeds at home, at church? Is it making sure the kids eat their vegetables? Is it maintaining the 4.0 GPA, the straight A's report card? Is it a fight for what you believe to be the right political ideals? Is it picking the right nonprofit? Is it the conversation about Jesus with your spouse, your kid, your neighbor, your coworker, your classmate?

There are a lot of contests, a lot of fights, that we can engage in. And we can argue the merits of each as being worth the fight. But we don't have the time or the energy to engage in every single fight. So, how do we pick the good fights?

The Apostle Paul is guiding Timothy, a pastor, as to what fights he should engage in, what fights are the good fights. He gives him the charge to "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction." (verse 2) "Keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry." (verse 5)

As a pastor, this gives me a good picture of what the good fights that I should choose look like. The good fight is the fight of keeping the faith, of helping others keep their faith in God and what he has done for them, how he has lived perfectly for them, died to remove their sins from them, rose from the dead to know that they will live forever with God. But it's so easy to be dragged into other fights, fights that aren't about keeping faith in God: fights about a church budget, fights about how to do outreach, fights about what worship services to have, fights about church history, fights about what words mean. Each of these could really be the good fight to engage with, but, for each fight, I have to step back and ask what I'm fighting for. Am I fighting to be right or am I fighting for this person's soul, to keep God and what he has done for them before their eyes, fighting to keep them connected to him? If I am not fighting for that, that fight is not the good fight.

How about for you? How do you decide what the good fights are and how do you engage them? Honestly, it's not that different from how Paul is guiding Timothy as a pastor. We can pour our time and energy in to many different contests, many different fights, and we have millions of voices telling us what the good fight is, from their point of view. The good fight, though, according to God through the Apostle Paul is to show people the Lord, how he saves them. With this in mind, then maybe it is worth keeping the house clean and the weeds pulled so as to not cause distractions for you or whoever you have over and instead focus on how you might share God with them. Maybe it is worth getting your kid to eat all their vegetables because you are teaching them that God gives them this food specifically as a gift for the benefit of their body. Maybe the fight to keep the high GPA is the good fight because with high grades people will see you as an academic who also fully believes in God and his Word and thus will have an inroad to share God with them. Maybe the fight for a nonprofit or a political ideal or candidate is the good fight if it allows you to live and express your Christian faith unconstrained, gives you a chance to show others Jesus.

But choosing the good fights don't end there. We are called to fight the good fight of faith in God every day as we are bombarded with temptations from the devil, the world at large, and our sinful nature. The world tells you that going against God's Word is okay. It tells you that it's okay and right to hate and speak bad about someone who wrongs you. The world tells you that it's okay to not

share your faith with someone, that this respects them, that they wouldn't believe you anyway, so why bother. The world tells us that it's not a big deal to view pornography, that it's a victimless sin, the actors get paid, no one will know about it, no one will call you out on it. So, don't fight these fights to curb your tongue, to share your faith, to keep your eyes pure.

To the world that just wants to have its own opinions confirmed, we say no. These are the good fights that are worth having. All these temptations try to lead us away from God. Satan wants you to feel as if you have no chance against these temptations, especially as the world tells you to go with it. And once you've given up the fight, the devil jumps all over you saying that God doesn't love you, that you can't be forgiven, that you can't win these fights. He is working really hard on us right now to get us to give up these good fights, to make you feel like it's a hopeless battle.

So, how do you keep fighting the good fight? We keep fighting, keep contending, because Satan's a liar. We are not in a losing war. Instead, we know that the war is won. That's why Paul kept going. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." (verses 7-8)

We keep fighting the good fights because Christ has already won the contest for us; we're just finishing the race, like Paul. Jesus has already secured for us the crown of righteousness, this status of being right with God. He did this by living perfectly for us. He fought the good fight against all the temptations that we experience, dismissing all the lies of Satan, and he did not give in, not even for a second. He won every good fight so that he could then give us that crown of righteousness in the end. This is why it's worth fighting. It is a good fight for our souls, a fight that Christ has already won for us. So we know that we are victors in the end.

But it's not just about knowing what is at the end; it's also about what we have right now for this good fight. The Lord is always with us in the good fights, just like he was for Jeremiah the prophet. As he was insulted and ridiculed and thought he was fighting a bad fight, a losing fight, he also confessed: "But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail." (Jeremiah 20:11a) God fights for us in these fights. Our enemies – the devil, the world, and our sinful nature – cannot take away what God has won for us.

For myself, I am very thankful that one of my friends who is a pastor recently shared with me Exodus 14:14. "The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still." When I feel like I have no fight left to fight the good fight, when it feels like there is no hope for this fight, I remember that it's not on me to win the fights. No, that's what God is going to do for me. When the good fight seems unwinnable, remember that the Lord is with us like a mighty warrior. He fights for us. We need only be still, and he wins.

You and I, we can't engage in every fight that exists in life. Some, like my fight with the floormat, are not the good fights of faith. We can let those go. When it comes to the battles for our faith in God and what he has done for us, we engage in that fight because it is a good fight – for ourselves and for others. We engage because we know that God has already won. We engage knowing that the Lord fights alongside us like a mighty warrior, as the one who wins the battle for us. Choose to fight the good fight for our faith in God, for my soul and the souls of others, because the Lord has already won the crown of righteousness for us all. Amen.