

Avoiding Spiritual Shipwreck

1 TIMOTHY 1:18-20

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For just a moment, I would invite you to try to think of a large or ocean-going ship (or perhaps a large ship from the Great Lakes), and as you try to think of a name of a large ship, I would suggest that most of the names we remember we probably remember because they sank! Here in this part of the world, we think of the Edmund Fitzgerald that went down during a storm in November 1975. Some of you have perhaps been to the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum up at Whitefish Point, Michigan, along the shore near where the Edmund Fitzgerald went down. The museum estimates that more than 6,000 ships have gone down in the Great Lakes, with at least 30,000 lives lost over many, many years. Expanding our knowledge of shipwrecks, we might also think of the sinking of the Maine and the Lusitania. And although it didn't sink, we might also think of the Exxon Valdez up in Alaska. My wife was in high school in Anchorage when the Valdez ran aground and spilled oil all along the coast up there. She wrote a paper about that disaster. In more recent times, most of us can remember the shipwreck of the Costa Concordia off the coast of Italy, where the captain seems to have been showing off for his girlfriend, and 32 lives were lost. As I understand it, the captain was convicted of manslaughter, causing a maritime accident, and abandoning ship, and he is now serving a 16-year sentence.

And then, of course, probably the most famous shipwreck of all time would be the Titanic. Yesterday morning on the church's Facebook page I posted a real-time animation of the sinking of the Titanic, from the time it first hit the iceberg to the time it sank 2 hours, 40 minutes later. You might not want to sit and stare at that video for the full 2 hours, 40 minutes, but it is interesting to let it run in the background as you are doing something else. But it is rather interesting to see how that disaster unfolded in real time. Years ago, we visited New York City for one day. We were staying with my sister-in-law in Washington, DC, and we took a train up to NYC for a day, leaving DC at 3 or 4 in the morning. We hit a few of the sights (Top of the Rock, Ground Zero, and so on), and as we were moving around Manhattan, we drove by the pier where the Titanic should have come in. It has now been redeveloped as a driving range (for golf). The ship that picked up the survivors dropped off the Titanic's lifeboats there, and then returned here, to Pier 54. This is where the survivors came ashore.

Most of you know that I am not a seafaring man! I have kayaked a bit in Lake Wingra. We go canoeing at our summer camp from time to time. We've taken the boat tour of the Apostle Islands here in Wisconsin. We took a whale-watching tour off of Los Angeles a few years ago. I've taken a number of ferries out in Washington State. And the longest I've spent on a ship of any kind was last summer's trip on the Alaska Marine Highway,

where my sister and I Gorilla-taped our tents to the deck of the ship. All of the remaining pictures this morning were taken off the back deck of that ship. I'll admit that I did get a bit nervous when we could no longer see the land, but we did survive that trip, although I did think about some of these famous shipwrecks from the past. And I did get somewhat concerned when we came ashore for a few hours in Ketchikan, Alaska, and noticed at the dock as we came in, a memorial to all of those who have been lost at sea. That was not reassuring at all. But even without a lot of experience at sea, most of us understand why the idea of a shipwreck is so terrifying. The ocean is incredibly powerful. Weather is unpredictable. There is the obvious fear of drowning or of being stranded for days without being found. We have the terrifying unknown of what actually lies under the water. Sharks! There is a sense of helplessness.

This morning, as we bring our thoughts back to the word of God, we remember that the apostle Paul had some experience with surviving a number of shipwrecks. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul is recounting some of his suffering, and he says, ***"...three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea."*** After these events, we then also have the shipwreck on his way to Rome, off the island of Malta (in Acts 27). Paul, then, survived at least four shipwrecks in his lifetime. And I'm not exactly sure what to think of that. I might have been a little nervous about traveling with somebody like Paul. But then again, he SURVIVED at least four shipwrecks. So perhaps Paul would have been a GOOD person to travel with.

This morning, though, I want us to realize that a vast majority of shipwrecks do not happen at sea! Most shipwrecks happen on dry land, all around us. This morning we return to our series of lessons from 1 Timothy. And as we come to 1 Timothy 1:18-20, we find that Paul uses his own personal experience on the sea to describe a terrifying spiritual danger. He writes to the young preacher Timothy, encouraging him to stay in Ephesus, preaching the truth, and we pick up with 1 Timothy 1:18-20,

¹⁸ This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you fight the good fight,¹⁹ keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.²⁰ Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme.

As we look at these three verses, I'd like to divide the lesson in half this morning - a command, and then a warning.

- I. **And we start with the COMMAND, and the command comes from Paul to Timothy, reminding him that he is to FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT.**

And he starts with something of a reminder, going back to some prophecies that were made about Timothy. He gives a ***"command"*** (a term used in the military), he is ***"entrusting"*** (a term used in banking, referring to a deposit), and he is saying that this command he is entrusting to Timothy is tied to some ***"prophecies."*** We aren't given specifics, but we have a few scattered references, starting a few chapters over, in 1 Timothy 4:14, where Paul said, ***"Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery [or the eldership]."*** We also have a brief reference in 2 Timothy 1:6, where Paul said, ***"For this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands."*** We combine these passages, and it seems that at some point in the past (perhaps as Timothy first became a preacher), some prophecies were made about his future, the elders laid their hands on Timothy to indicate their approval and support, to send him on his way, and Paul (as an

apostle) also laid his hands on Timothy to transmit some kind of a spiritual gift. But back here in 1 Timothy 1:18, a number of years later, Paul is now saying, ***“I command you, in keeping with those prophecies, to fight the good fight”*** [paraphrased]. And with this, Paul reminds us that we are in a ***“fight.”***

When we first obeyed the gospel, our sins were forgiven, but what we might not have realized at the time is that we also ENLISTED. When we were baptized, in a sense, we signed up for a conflict. We signed up for a spiritual battle. In a sense, we switched sides. We were rescued, Paul says in Colossians 1, from the domain of darkness, and we were transferred into the kingdom of God’s Son. And when we switched sides, we upset the ruler of this world. We think of the Israelites leaving Egypt. They left, and Pharaoh is so mad that he chases them down, all the way to the Red Sea. The same thing happens when we obey the gospel. We take on a new role in an ongoing spiritual battle. We remember another passage Paul wrote to this church in Ephesus, the reminder to put on the whole armor of God, and the reminder that ***“...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”*** The Christian life, then, is a struggle. In our minds, it’s tempting to think that if we’re struggling we’re doing something wrong, that the Christian life is supposed to be easy. But that is not the case. Often, when we struggle it means that we’re putting up a fight. And that’s good. And that’s the reminder Paul gives to Timothy: He is to ***“fight the good fight.”*** Do not get discouraged, but keep on fighting! And this is a fight that Timothy has to fight for himself. This isn’t something that Paul can do for him.

What does this fight look like? Thankfully, Paul tells us, doesn’t he? We fight the good fight by ***“keeping faith and a good conscience.”*** So, it’s not using flaming swords to fight off demons, but this spiritual battle looks a whole lot like keeping the faith and maintaining a good conscience! To keep the faith means that we maintain it, that we hold onto it, that we pay attention to what we believe, that we truly believe what the Bible says, that we are aware of spiritual danger - not that we obsess over it, but we are aware of the fight that we’re in. It seems that one of the first rules of being in a fight would be knowing that we are in a fight. If I’m in a fight and don’t know that I’m in a fight, I’m in some serious trouble. We think about the Titanic and that animation we posted online. So much time went by as they refused to take the threat seriously. They were going down but didn’t know it; they didn’t admit it. In the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum, they have a saying among the wives of sailors on the Great Lakes, ***“The wife of a careless man is almost a widow.”*** ****REPEAT**** That seems to be the warning Paul is giving here. We need to pay attention. We need to be careful. We need to hold on to the faith. We need to pay attention to everything Paul is teaching in this letter. In the next few chapters, we are heading toward some hard sayings, we are heading toward some truth that the world around us rejects completely, some truth that goes against much of what the world around us believes. And that’s the struggle. Fight the good fight, holding on to the faith. As Paul will also write to Ephesus, we are not to be like, ***“...children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.”*** Instead, we are to speak the truth in love, we are to grow up. We are to hold on to the faith. We might be tempted to try to improve God’s truth, or to dismiss it, but we are not to give in. We are not to let go of the rudder, but we are to hold on to it. We are to keep the faith.

The other part of fighting the good fight is maintaining a good conscience. So, we keep the faith, but we also keep a good conscience. If the ***“faith”*** is what we believe then the ***“good conscience”*** seems to be a reference to what we actually do. Sometimes people think that the conscience is that part of us that always tells us to do good, but that is not really what the conscience is. The conscience tells us to do what we THINK is good. Of course, what we THINK is right might not actually BE right. Depending on how we’ve been trained, sometimes the conscience tells us to do what is actually wrong. I think of visiting with a young mom 25 years ago as she

praised her 3-year old for using all kinds of filthy language. Every terrible word you can imagine, this mom would praise her little girl up and down for using it. Well, that child grew up trained to think that that was the right thing to do. The conscience, then, needs to be properly trained. The conscience needs to be educated. And that's the **"faith"** part of it. We hold on to the faith, we maintain the faith, and then, with God's word as our guide, with God's word as our moral compass, we live in such a way that we maintain a good conscience.

When we were at the fellowship dinner at the church out in Port Angeles, Washington, two weeks ago, I sat next to an old guy who had moved up there from California, and in his early years he served as basically the navigator on a ferry, making runs out to Catalina Island, off the coast of Los Angeles. I asked him what that was like, and he made the comment, "When guiding a ship, you never look down at the water; instead, you keep your eye on the heading (on the dial with the degrees on it), and you adjust your course based on that." He said that if you steer a ship while looking down at the water, you will never travel in a straight line. And in a sense, that seems to be what Paul is saying here. Hold on to the faith. Maintain a good conscience. Keep your eye on the heading, and make adjustments as needed. Live life with a good conscience.

Someone wrote on this passage and suggested that a **"good conscience"** is a synonym for an "obedient heart." And I would agree with that. We hold on to the faith, and we obey it. We educate the conscience properly, and then we do what we know to be right. That is the struggle. That is the **"good fight"** Paul refers to here. And it's not easy, is it? It's hard to always do what we know to be right. There are many pressures pulling us off course - temptation, pride, stubbornness, laziness, covetousness, any number of fleshly desires, and on and on and on. So we have this reminder to stay in the struggle. I would emphasize: We're not talking perfection here. Our ship might waver a bit, but we fight to keep it on course. That is the struggle. We don't give in to sin or temptation, but we keep on pressing back against it.

And here is a special danger: If we violate the conscience, if we for some reason do what we know to be wrong, our response at that point is critical. Sometimes, we feel guilty, and instead of changing our behavior, we dig in, and we end up changing what we believe. That leads to a seared conscience or a calloused conscience, a conscience that no longer cares about what is truly right. The point for us is that we keep the faith and that we keep a good conscience.

II. As we come to the second half of this passage, we move from a command to a **WARNING**.

The warning comes in verses 19-20 as Paul gives an example of what NOT to do. So, on one hand, we are to fight the good fight by keeping the faith and keeping a good conscience, but some have **"rejected"** these things. To **"reject"** is to "push away." I think of a 3-year old and a huge bowl of peas. But we need to think about this. What have these people pushed away? They have pushed away, they have rejected - the good fight! They have rejected the faith. They have pushed away the idea of having a good conscience. Can we even imagine that? We have these men, supposedly religious leaders of some kind, and they have completely rejected 1.) the faith and 2.) their own good conscience. They have rejected the word of God, and they make no effort to follow it. And for this reason, they have **"suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith."** They have run aground spiritually. Their lives are a spiritual disaster. In a spiritual sense, these men are lost at sea. They have rejected the truth of God's word, and they no longer care how they are living.

And in this passage, Paul goes even further, and he names these men - Hymenaeus and Alexander. In our Wednesday class, we've been working through some of those huge lists of names in the book of Nehemiah, and we've wondered: Why are these names here? And we've pretty much concluded that those names were

important to those people's descendants, to know how they fit into God's plan, that each person was important. But think about that here. These men are listed by name for a reason. And it seems that the reason is: Watch out for these men! Do not be like them. Do not be pulled away by them. Do not be influenced by their teaching.

Who were these men? Well, with some names repeated in the Bible, it might be hard to nail this down. We do have a reference to an Alexander in Ephesus back in Acts 19. He was the man who tried to defend Paul from the angry mob. But then we also have a second reference to an Alexander associated with Paul in 2 Timothy 4:14, where Paul said, ***"Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds."*** I don't know whether these are all the same man. But we do have a bit more information about Hymenaeus over in 2 Timothy 2, written about two years later. So the situation had perhaps changed a bit, but we come to 2 Timothy 2:16-18, ***"But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and they upset the faith of some."*** I wouldn't swear my soul on it or anything, but I am assuming that this is the same Hymenaeus. And if it is, the teaching Paul calls out as being false is this idea that the resurrection has already taken place. Hymenaeus was telling people that they had missed the resurrection. Interestingly, the same false teaching has stubbornly continued into modern times, the idea that Jesus returned in 70 AD and that that was his second and final coming, that we are basically in heaven right now. Most of you don't know this, but there is a man we had to remove from the church for another false teaching years ago who now holds to a very similar false teaching, that the resurrection has already taken place and that we are basically in heaven right now. But the point for us is: Paul calls this man out on it, by name, in scripture. What a tragedy, to have your name recorded in the word of God as someone who has suffered shipwreck of the faith.

But isn't this what Paul warned about back in Acts 20 when he spoke to the elders from Ephesus maybe 20 years earlier? Speaking to the elders, he said, ***"I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert...."*** Putting these passages together, I would not be surprised at all to learn that Hymenaeus and Alexander were at one time elders in Ephesus. And I say that not only because of Paul's warning in Acts 20, but I also say that because of how Paul says that he ***"handed these men over to Satan."*** That seems to be a reference to the ultimate act of church discipline, removing them from the congregation. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul tells the CHURCH to do this, but here, Paul says that HE has done it. Why the difference? Perhaps because these men were leaders in the church. Perhaps the church didn't think they had the authority to discipline these men. Of course, later in the book, Paul will address the discipline of elders. But I am open to the possibility that these men were leaders.

But all of us know people who have fallen away like that, for whatever reason. A few moments ago, I mentioned that memorial to those men lost at sea up in Ketchikan. If we wanted to, we could have a bronze plaque over here, couldn't we, with the names of those who have been lost at sea spiritually. Any one of us could end up with our names on a plaque like that. And that is basically what Paul does here as he gives these names as a warning: Do not reject the faith and a good conscience like these men did. Do not give up the fight.

These men, once faithful, had shipwrecked, and Paul gives their names as a warning. But there is another reason for what Paul does here - he delivers them to Satan ***"so that they will be taught not to blaspheme."*** So, this isn't just punishment, but it is discipline for a reason. He wants these two men to learn from this. He

wants them to learn not to blaspheme. He wants them to learn to stop speaking against God. He wants them to see what they are doing and to turn back to God, to repent, to change their behavior.

Conclusion:

And that is the point of this passage for us. We have choices. On one hand, we can fight the good fight, we can hold on to the faith, we can maintain a good conscience. Or, on the other hand, we can just let go spiritually, we can drift, we can give in to a life of sin, we can take the easy way - but when we do, we are heading for this shipwreck that Paul warns about here. I don't know where you are spiritually right now. But in a sense, all of us are at this point where we can choose to go in one of two very different directions.

If we can help you in any way to maintain that struggle against sin, we hope you will let us know. God sent his Son to die in our place. We respond with obedient faith. We turn away from sin, we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism for the forgiveness of our sins, and then we live the Christian life. If that's the direction you'd like to go, you are invited. Come talk to one of our elders after the service, or talk to me right now as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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