

Don't Win the Battle, But Lose the War

By John R. Gibson

2 Timothy, Paul's last epistle, should be seen as a militant call to the proclamation and defense of the truth of the gospel. Though he was in chains (1:8; 2:9) and would soon die because of his faith in Christ (4:6), the aged apostle urged Timothy to continue on with boldness even if it caused him to suffer for the sake of the gospel.

- Do not be ashamed, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel. 1:8
- Hold fast the pattern of sound words. 1:13
- Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2:1
- Take the things you have been taught and pass them on to others. 2:2
- Endure hardship. 2:3
- Don't allow yourself to become entangled in the affairs of this world. 2:4
- Remind people of the truths of the gospel, while charging them not to strive or quarrel about words to no profit. 2:11-14
- Be diligent to be a worker who can properly handle God's word. 2:15
- Stay away from profane and idle babblings. 2:16
- Hymenaeus and Philetus are dangerous men who overthrow the faith of some with their false teaching. 2:17, 18
- Be prepared for perilous times in which some will resist the truth. 3:1-7
- As evil men get worse, hold firmly to the Scriptures which you have been taught. 3:13-17
- Preach the word! Whether popular or unpopular, preach the word and use it for both positive instruction and negative rebuke and correction. 4:1-5

In this brief letter Paul repeatedly charges his son in the faith with the responsibility of continuing the same fight he had so faithfully fought himself. The apostle had boldly proclaimed the truth everywhere he went, and like a soldier he had taken up the sword of truth against enemies, including both those among the saints and those outside the church. In our age and culture of compromise and tolerance of everything except what men perceive to be intolerance, we need to read again the exhortations of men like Paul, Jude, and John as they exhort us to rebuke, contend, and put to the test (2 Timothy 4:2; Jude 3; 1 John 4:1; et al). Saints of God must realize souls are at stake and once again become spiritual soldiers who will *"watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong"* (1 Corinthians 16:13).

We have been called to do battle and we need to be soldiers of the cross, but let's also realize the danger of "winning the battle, while losing the war." Consider the exhortation and caution sounded in this

otherwise militant epistle:

“Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.” 2 Timothy 2:22-26

We tend to think of youthful lusts as primarily sexual in nature, but the contrasts of righteousness, faith, love, and peace suggest that Paul was concerned about much more. As he was calling his son to take up the sword, he was also cautioning him about his motivations and methods.

It would be a tragic mistake if we were to pit 2 Timothy 2:23 against the remainder of the New Testament, including other parts of this very epistle, and contend that every dispute is a foolish and ignorant one, for there are disputes we must engage in (cf. Acts 15:1, 2). However, this verse does sound a clear warning against engaging in unprofitable disputes. Before we engage in any dispute, let’s ask ourselves if souls are at stake? Are we looking at a situation where people need to repent and escape the snare of the devil? Or could it be that we simply like to argue? Is it possible that I take someone on in a spiritual battle only because my pride has been wounded?

If and when it is necessary to do battle, we must commit ourselves to...

- Being reasonable, not quarrelsome.
- A gentle, not competitive spirit.
- Teaching, not merely raising our voice or trying to overpower with our superior vocabulary, academic credentials, experience, etc.
- Patience. (Both the NASB and ESV have the idea of being patient when wronged. Even if our spiritual opponent uses carnal weapons we are not permitted to do so. 2 Corinthians 10:3-5)
- Using humility (gentleness—ESV) in our correction of them.

There comes a time with some when they must be delivered to Satan (1 Timothy 1:18-20) or identified as promoting a cancerous growth (2 Timothy 2:17, 18), but let’s begin with the goal in mind of bringing them to repentance and saving their souls. What a tragedy it would be if we were to fight a good battle against their ungodliness and false teaching, only to lose the war for our own souls because we gave in to the use of carnal weapons.

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