

The Character of a Pastor

We are a couple of weeks away from celebrating fifty years. It's hard to comprehend that all these many years have gone by. It has been a benediction to me and to Patricia and our family that is beyond comprehension and beyond description. The Lord has been kind to me perhaps more than anyone, putting me here with such wonderful and loving people, and bringing into my life so many blessings that I can't even count them. I don't know why the Lord has done this in His sovereign purpose, but I want to certainly be grateful to Him; and I trust He knows the gratitude that is in my heart in every conscious, waking moment for what He has allowed me to enjoy here through all these years.

And I thought as we head toward that celebration it might be good to get a little bit of a picture of what the Lord sort of placed in my heart at the beginning that set the course for Grace Church. I'm not the explanation for what this church is - this is the work of God. But I knew that I wanted the blessing of God on my life and ministry. I knew that I wanted to finish well; but more importantly than finishing well, I wanted to start right and go down the path that the Lord would promise to bless.

So I knew I had to understand what God expected of me as a pastor even before I came here. I wanted to know that. I had to understand what the Lord expected the church to be. And then I needed to understand the role of the Word of God in all of this. So those are going to be the themes that we'll look at over the next three Sundays. Today, the character of the pastor, the man of God; next Sunday, the life of the church; and then the final one, the work of the Word.

Coming out of seminary and knowing that the Lord had called me to preach, I graduated from seminary when I was about 24 years old. I was young, and I guess in the Lord's purposes it wasn't my time yet to become a pastor. So for five years until I was about 29 I was preaching mostly to young people, but to many, many people. I preached about 35 times a month for those five years, and a lot of experience preaching – wonderful, wonderful years. But in the back of my heart was always a desire to go to a church and to shepherd a flock. And there were a couple of churches that talked to me during those years, but felt that I was too young and inexperienced.

Grace Church wasn't in that category because Grace Church had had two pastors, and both of them had died, and so there were two precious widows here. So the main criteria for the next guy was youth. So if I didn't qualify on any other level I qualified on that level. And as a result, the Lord brought me here, and the rest, of course, is His story to tell. I am not the reason this church is what it is; God is the reason it is what it is. But it was a very, very important issue in my heart to understand what ministry needed to be, to be clear about the role that a faithful pastor would play and clear about the very character and life of the church and what it should be, and then clear about the Word of God on which everything would be built.

Early in my ministry, obviously I studied all these things, trying to figure out all of this even before I came to Grace. And one of the passages that was very clear to me was the one that I want to call to your attention this morning: 1 Timothy 6. The letters from Paul to Timothy, 1 and 2 Timothy, and the letter from Paul to Titus are called the pastoral epistles. First and 2 Timothy give instruction to pastors. And much of what is – in fact, all of what is in these three letters - is very helpful to anyone in pastoral ministry. But the portion in chapter 6 has always stood out in my mind as foundational for my understanding of what God expected from me.

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So let's look at 1 Timothy 6, and let me read starting at verse 6: "But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

"But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He will bring about at the proper time—He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen."

That is one of the most beautiful doxologies in the New Testament, and it comes after straightforward instruction to a pastor. If a pastor wants to have a life worthy of a doxology, if a pastor wants to have a life that he can lift up before God and honor God, then he has to follow the instruction of this portion of Scripture.

Now I want you to notice in verse 11 the identifying phrase "man of God," "man of God." When I first came across this I knew this was the title that I would bear, that I had been called and prepared and engaged by the Lord to be a man of God. The title simply identifies Timothy in this case. It is a very clear title, but it has immeasurable and rich elements.

What a privilege to be called God's man, a man who belongs to God in a personal way. He doesn't belong, in a sense, to the church. He doesn't belong to an association. He doesn't even belong to relationships in life, family, and extended family. In a very unique way he is God's man. And by the way, that's a very selective phrase. It is never used in the New Testament for anyone other than Timothy, and that makes it unique. It is to Timothy that this term "man of God" is first applied. However it was a common term in the Old Testament. Paul must have known that, and certainly Timothy would have known that because he was raised on the Old Testament.

What did it mean in the Old Testament to be a man of God? It first appears in Deuteronomy 33:1 where Moses, the great prophet, is the first one called "the man of God." It was also used in the book of Judges, chapter 13, verses 6 and 7, to describe an angel, a messenger from God sent with the message to the wife of Manoah announcing the birth of Sampson. It was also used to describe a prophet who spoke for God to Eli, the high priest, predicting divine judgment on his wretched family (1 Samuel chapter 2). And then it was used to identify Samuel. Samuel is called "the man of God" in 1 Samuel 9. So we gain from that a very clear indication that this is reserved for someone who speaks for God, speaks on behalf of God; someone who belongs to God in a unique way so that he is God's representative speaking on God's behalf.

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And there were more in the Old Testament. It was used of the prophet Shemaiah who was sent by God to prophesy against Rehoboam. It was used again for a prophet who spoke the Word of God to Jeroboam in regard his being replaced and judged. It describes Elijah. In 1 Kings 17 it describes Elisha. In 2 Kings chapter 4, it describes David. It describes the prophet who confronted Amaziah; that prophet is called the man of God in 2 Chronicles 25. It identifies a prophet named Igdaliah in Jeremiah 35:4. And the sum of all these uses tells us unequivocally this is a technical term for someone who belongs uniquely to God in that he speaks on behalf of God. He relays God's message to the world.

A further description of this calling is found in 2 Peter 1:21, "No prophecy from God" – no Scripture – "was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." So here we learn something else about God's man. When he speaks the Word of God he speaks by the power of the Holy Spirit. God has always had His Spirit-empowered preachers, prophets, and messengers. Men of God are those uniquely called to proclaim His word. That summed up for me the full range of my responsibility as a pastor, to be the spokesman who spoke for God and spoke His revealed Word.

In 2 Timothy chapter 3, we read in verse 16, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate," – or complete – "equipped for every good work." Now he's not only empowered by the Spirit, but he speaks the Scripture. And that is written to Timothy; but it goes beyond Timothy to every man of God. When Paul calls Timothy a "man of God," he puts him in a long line of very elite people, a very rare and unique calling. It is extended to all those who speak for the Lord in the power of the Spirit, using the Scripture. "Man of God" is to be perfected by the Spirit and the Word.

So the title characterizes particularly those who are God's messenger. *Pilgrim's Progress* calls them "the King's champions." They are men whose lives are lifted above worldly aims and temporal things and devoted to divine service. They are men who belong to the spiritual order of which things temporal and transitory and perishing have no permanent relationship. They're not the world's men, and nor are they the devil's men, nor are they the church's men. They are God's men, and they are raised above earthly things. They are God's personal possession.

As Paul writes to Timothy he recognizes the difficulty of his protégé, his pupil's circumstances. He is, at the time Paul writes him, serving in a church at Ephesus with lots of problems: false teachers, sinful leaders, doctrinal error, ungodliness. It's all there, and Timothy is confronting it, and he's young, and he tends to be timid. Paul says, "Nonetheless, you are God's man. You are God's man in a very difficult situation. You are working for the King in the kingdom against the power of the darkness."

There's a contrast here that I think is very important. Paul talks about false teachers a lot in 1 Timothy. In chapter 1, verses 3-7, he talks about false teachers. In chapter 4, very explicit section, verses 1-5, he talks about false teachers. In chapter 6, he talks about false teachers. So he is contrasting the man of God to these false teachers. In fact, at the end of each of those discussions about false teachers, the contrast becomes clear.

If you go to chapter 1, after having said a lot about false teachers, he comes down to verse 18 and says to Timothy, "I command you, I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you fight the good fight, keeping the faith and good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme." So in contrast to false teachers, you are to be a trustworthy servant, fighting the good fight,

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preaching the true Word of God. As he calls it earlier, “The glorious gospel of the blessed God with which you have been entrusted.”

Again, in chapter 4 he has much to say about false teachers in the opening five verses, and in verse 6 he speaks to Timothy, “In pointing out these things to the brethren, you’ll be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and the sound doctrine, which you have been following. And have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women.” In other words, “You are in contrast to those false teachers.”

Same thing is true in verse 14 of that fourth chapter, “Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. Take pain with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.” So in contrast to a false teacher, you’re a true teacher, you’re a man of God. In contrast to the men of Satan, you are God’s man.

All that points to this unique responsibility. And as we come into chapter 6 we come to verse 11. Again, Paul has spoken about false teachers earlier in this sixth chapter: “If anyone advocates a different doctrine, doesn’t agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the doctrine conforming to godliness, he’s conceited, understands nothing; has a morbid interest in controversial questions, disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain.”

Again, contrasting Timothy, a man of God, with the corrupt false teachers. All that points to the responsibility of the pastor to be God’s man; and that’s why he says in verse 11 where we pick up our text, “But you man of God, you with this unique identification, you man who belongs to God, this is how you are to conduct your life.”

This was so important to me many, many years ago, that early on in the ministry I made much of this portion of Scripture; and one of the men that I admired as a young pastor was W. A. Criswell, who was at Dallas First Baptist for about forty-five years, who actually came here and preached on a Sunday, which was a highlight for me. He had a study Bible, the *Criswell Study Bible*, and when that study Bible came out – you might have had one, you might find one around your house somewhere – he had chosen to put my sermon from many years ago in a written form inside the pages of that study Bible. So I understood that it had the same effect on him, and he hoped it would have on others, that this passage had had on me.

So what is it that defines a man of God? There are four things here that Paul points to. The four features of a man of God, the four marks of a man of God. Number one: man of God is known by what he flees from. Verse 11, “But flee from these things, you man of God.”

“Flee” in the present imperative means it’s ongoing: “keep fleeing,” “keep fleeing.” It’s not one action in a point of time; it is a lifelong responsibility: “Keep on fleeing.” The Greek word is *pheuge*, from which we get the English word “fugitive.” A fugitive is a running person, somebody in flight. It pictures one running from a plague, or running from danger, or running from an enemy, or running from an advancing army, or running from a poisonous serpent. A man of God then learns to be a running man, a fleeing man. There are certain things that he has to flee.

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First Corinthians 6:18, Paul says, “Flee fornication,” sexual sin. First Corinthians 10:14, he says, “Flee idolatry.” But here he says, “Flee these things.” What “things” is he talking about? Well, he’s talking about the things that have just been mentioned. Verse 5, “False teachers suppose that godliness is a means of gain.” False teachers everywhere in Scripture, Old and New Testament, are said to be in it for the money. They make merchandise of you.

On the other hand, “Godliness,” verse 6, “actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. We brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either.” As Joe Bailey said years ago, “You don’t see a hearse pulling a U-Haul.”

“If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows.” And while that is generally true, that revelation comes in a text that is speaking to pastors. “False teachers are in it for the money. You cannot be. You cannot be.”

Earlier in this letter he said we are to “flee myths and worldly fables and endless genealogies.” Later in the sixth chapter, “We are to flee empty chatter.” Second Timothy 2:22, “We are to flee youthful lusts.” But here, in contrast to the false teachers, it is to flee the love of money, to flee greed and all its associated devices, which are so deadly and destructive. This is the sin of false teachers and liars, who pervert the truth for gain, who make merchandise of people, who seek filthy lucre, who preach for money; from Balaam, the prophet who was bought by the highest bidder; to Judas, the apostle who sold Jesus for thirty pieces of silver; from the false prophets of Israel who were called “greedy dogs” because they never had enough of exploiting the people for their own gain; concerned only for their own gain, Isaiah 56 says.

It speaks of the covetous prophets and priests of Jeremiah’s time, the prophets of Ezekiel’s time who could be bought with handfuls of barley and a loaf of bread, the prophets who divined for money in Micah, to the false teachers who speak good words and fair speeches to the Romans to deceive the innocent for the satisfaction of their own bodies, and the unruly and empty talkers and deceivers of Crete who subverted whole houses, “teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake” (Titus 1:10-11). The love of money perverts anyone, but the love of money especially perverts teachers. Second Peter 2 says, “In greed they exploit you.” First Peter 5:2, “They do it for dirty lucre.” The pastor has to flee from all things associated with money and greed, and be content with whatever the Lord provides.

The apostle Paul, in Acts 20, set a standard for me when I was very young and reading through the book of Acts when he said this in verse 33 to the Ephesian elders: “I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me.” In other words, “I’ve worked to provide my needs and even support those with me.”

“In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” That is the only quote by the lips of Jesus in the entire New Testament outside the gospels, and it is, “It is more blessed to give than receive.”

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A faithful teacher will not be a taker, a faithful man of God will be a giver. He will be marked by eagerness and willingness to give. It doesn't mean he's not to be supported. Paul makes a case for that in 1 Corinthians 9. Has a right to be supported. Says in verse 14, "The Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel." But he says, "I've used none of these things. I leave it with the Lord. I don't advance my own cause. I'm not in this for the money."

First Thessalonians 2:9, "You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers." How did you behave? "For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God." He worked on the side so as not to be a burden.

You may be a preacher; but if you love money, you're not a man of God. You cannot be God's man and money's man. You can't serve God and money; Jesus said that. But so many have perverted that. Look, there's a lot of money to be made at the expense of people. When Jesus sent out the disciples to heal he said, "Take no money." We know people will pay money for false healings. You can imagine how much money the disciples could have made when they genuinely could heal, if they put a price on their power. Take no money; never put a price on your ministry.

I'm disturbed, greatly disturbed, to see many who manipulate people for their own personal financial gain, and they do it in a subtle way. Be very aware of someone who comes and says, "The Lord gave me a vision of what this ministry needs to be. The Lord showed me that we need to plant this many churches, or build this large an institution, or accomplish these goals. In order to do that I'm going to need your investment and your money."

First of all, he can't know what the Lord has in mind for the future. That is personal ambition couched in spiritual language, and people have been used and abused relentlessly for some supposed vision that is nothing more than personal ambition. Beware when somebody tells you that there's a plan out there that has to be fulfilled, and it came from the Lord. No one knows that.

Grace Church is not what I planned. I've never had a plan for the church. I've never had a plan for anything except to show up next Sunday and teach the Word of God. That's the plan: love the people, serve the people, shepherd, build leaders. The plan is God's. I only know it when it happens; I only know it when it appears; I only know it when it unfolds. But you can make a lot of money, fill your coffers by convincing people that they're a part of some vision that God gave you about the future that can't come true unless they make sacrifices. Very often it's little more than a Ponzi scheme, because they cannot know what the future is. I never expected Grace Church to be like this. I have nothing to do with the plan. All that we are is simply the result of what God sovereignly has done.

A man of God is known by what he flees from, and what he flees from is the love of money. Secondly, he's known by what he follows after. "But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue" – or "follow after" – "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness." He's a running man, running hard and running relentlessly, running all the time away from the corruption of money. That can be a temptation for people in spiritual leadership when they are highly esteemed, when they're elevated, when people look up to them, believe in them; they can take advantage of those people for personal gain. So the preacher spends his whole life running from that. And while he's running away from the love of money, he's running in the direction of these virtues: righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness or meekness.

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“Pursue” or “follow after,” another present imperative which means “continuing action.” This is lifelong. We’re always fleeing – that’s the negative. We’re always pursuing. We’re always running away from and running toward. Christian life is an effort to run from evil and to pursue good. That’s our life. That’s a command for every believer, but particularly those in leadership.

Listen to 1 Peter chapter 3, verse 10: “For the one desires life, to love and see good days, must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit. He must turn away from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it.” So he’s running from evil toward peace. “For the eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” You want the Lord’s blessing, you run your whole lifelong away from evil; you run toward righteousness.

Proverbs 15:9, “The Lord loves him that pursues righteousness.” Not success, not size of the church, not fame, not esteem, not popularity, not promotion, not money, not possessions. What are you running after? What are you ambitious about? What is your ambition? Paul says, 2 Corinthians 5, “My ambition is to be pleasing to Him.” That’s the only legitimate ambition.

A man of God pursues – look at these six; and we don’t have time to develop all of them, but they’re familiar to you – “righteousness.” The remnant of faithful Israelites was called by Isaiah, “You that follow after righteousness,” Isaiah 51:1. The writer of Hebrews says, “The only people who will see the Lord are those who follow after holiness.”

The righteousness he’s talking about is not imputed righteousness, but practical righteousness, doing what is right: right behavior, right conduct, right speech, obeying God’s standards in your life. This is the most comprehensive summary term for all virtues. The man of God pursues righteousness: what is right, what is good, what honors God, what glorifies God, what God commands. That’s his behavior.

The second word, “godliness,” goes inside. Righteousness looks at the things that are right. Godliness looks on the inside at the reverence and holiness and piety and devotion of his heart to the Lord whom he loves. Right behavior flows out of a right heart attitude, a worshiping heart. All of life must be lived to serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear (Hebrews 12:28). Godliness is mentioned nine times in the three pastoral letters; such a vital, internal reality.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 4, Paul speaks to that issue. He says, It’s required of stewards, “servants of Christ, stewards to the mystery of God...that a man be found faithful or trustworthy. But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself.” “The reason you can’t make a legitimate examination of me and even I can’t is because you don’t know my heart, and I don’t even know my heart. I’m biased in my own favor.”

So he says in verse 4, “For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I’m not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.” “Even when I don’t think anything’s wrong with me, that’s not the final court; God makes the final judgment.”

“Therefore,” verse 5, “do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; then shall each man’s praise come to him from God.” Pursuing righteous behavior and pursuing godliness in the heart, those are the two overarching virtues of the man of God. He’s godly on the outside because he’s godly in the heart.

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Watch your heart, watch your motives, watch your desires, and that'll take care of your conduct. Whatever you are in your heart will show up on the outside. Through the years I've said this thousands of times. Time and truth go hand in hand. Given enough time the truth comes out. You can't hide your heart. You can't hide your heart.

Many years ago I discovered a really helpful verse in Psalm 101, and it's been consciously on my mind through the years. You perhaps have never even read it. Psalm 101, verse 6, second half of the verse, "He who walks in a blameless way is the one who will minister to me." "He who walks in a blameless way," says God, "is the one who will minister to me." Paul was concerned with his righteousness and godliness and with Timothy's.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9, "I beat my body to bring it into submission, lest in preaching to others, I myself would become *adokimos*," "disqualified." He knew his sinful tendencies. He was the chief of sinners he said in the first chapter of 1 Timothy. Romans 7, he said he was battling sin his whole life long, but he was winning the battle in the power of the Holy Spirit.

People will feel, I believe, the power of a righteous life. The power of internal godliness will show up on the outside. John Flavel, the Puritan, wrote this: "It is easier to cry against a thousand sins of others than to mortify one sin in ourselves." John Owen said, "A minister may fill his pews, his communion roll, mouths of the public; but what he is on his knees in secret before Almighty God, that he is and no more."

Unholiness, sin in the heart, will show up in unrighteous behavior and disqualify a man of God. Paul feared that he would be disqualified if he did not subdue the flesh. And the flesh is only subdued on the outside when it's being subdued by the Spirit and the Word on the inside.

Charles Bridges said, "If we should study the Bible more as ministers than as Christians to find matter for the instruction of our people, than food for the nourishment of our own souls, we neglect to place ourselves at the feet of our divine teacher. Our communion with Him is cut off, and we become mere formalists in sacred profession."

James Stalker, his book in the Yale series on preaching, said, "Brethren, study God's Word diligently for your own edification; and when it has become more to you than your necessary food, sweeter than honey in the honeycomb, it will be impossible for you to speak of it to others without a glow passing into your words which will betray the delight with which it has inspired your own heart."

So a man of God "pursues." He pursues righteousness and godliness. And then "faith," which means "confident trust in God for everything"; this is an unwavering confidence, loyalty to God's power, God's purpose, God's plan, God's provision. He lives under God's sovereignty happily, gladly, joyfully, entrusts himself to God. No frustration, no forcing, no manipulation; just trusting God.

His life is then marked by "love," *agapē*, the highest volitional love, unrestricted, unrestrained toward God, toward man. He is a man who loves God. He is a man who loves others. He is a man who is completely happy to trust the sovereign purposes of God. This is the man of God.

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Those are inward virtues: faith and love. And there's some outward virtues: perseverance and meekness. "Perseverance" is *hupomonē*. This is "endurance." A faithful man of God is going to demonstrate endurance. He's pursuing endurance; he's in for the long haul. It's not a passive acquiescence, it's a victorious endurance. The idea is unswerving loyalty to the Lord, to the church, to the truth, for the long haul - unwavering, unflinching.

He never focuses on himself in good times or in hard times. The noble virtue is the ability to endure injustice, to endure pain, to battle grief, and to have spiritual staying power that endures even to death. And he never loses his joy, and he never wanes in his experience, and he's never burned out, and he's never so disgusted he walks away. A man of God has "endurance" and he's marked by "gentleness" or "meekness," which is to say that even though life is hard, he never becomes bitter or angry, because it's never about him.

So what do we learn about a man of God? He's known by what he flees from, what he follows after, and what he fights for. Verse 12, "Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses."

It's essential to say that the man of God is a fighter. He is a fighter. In the strongest sense of the terms, he's a battler, he's a warrior, he's a soldier. Paul speaks with that kind of language in 2 Timothy 2, verse 3, "Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus."

You're battling the world, the flesh, the devil, sin in us, sin around us, battling error, corruptions of the gospel. First Corinthians 16:8, Paul says, "There's an open door for me here at Ephesus, but there are many adversaries." It's a battle; it'll never be anything but a battle.

We go to battle with the armor of a soldier and we "fight," *agōnizomai*, present imperative. We "keep on fighting," present tense again, *agōnizomai*. The word *agony* comes from that word. It's a constant, agonizing fight. Always, always battling; never does the battle wane. Takes conviction; takes discipline. You have to be like an athlete who runs to win, like a boxer who doesn't beat the air, but strikes his opponent, 1 Corinthians 9 tells us.

We are literally "fighting the good fight." The verb and the noun are related. We are "*agōnizomai* the *agōn*." We are "agonizing through the agony," the spiritual conflict. We are defending the truth, which is constantly being assaulted.

Listen to the words of Jude who says, "You must," verse 3, "contend earnestly for the faith" – that's the content of biblical truth – "which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."

You've got to fight for the faith; it's a battle. To do that, 1 Corinthians 16:12-13 says, "Act like men. Be strong. Be courageous." We are storming the fortresses of error. It's intense, and it never stops. But we're fighting for "the faith." That's an objective term. We're fighting for the Christian faith; noblest cause in the world - the truth of God.

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If you've been at Grace Church for any time you know we've been engaged in that fight. Every time some doctrinal error starts to move in the life of the church we address that from the Word of God through the years. Book after book after book has been written because I wanted to address that. I wanted to defend the faith. I wanted Christian people to know the truth. And so, first, it was *The Gospel According to Jesus*, and then *The Gospel According to the Apostles*, and then *The Gospel According to Paul*, and *The Gospel According to God*; always defending the true gospel against false gospels, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, *The Jesus You Can't Ignore* – book after book after book – *The Truth War*, *The Charismatics*, *Strange Fire*. What do we do? We're fighting constantly for the faith.

That's life in ministry. And what drives that? Paul says, "Take hold" – verse 12 – "of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." There was a day when Timothy made a profession of faith in Christ, and he confessed Jesus as Lord, and it was before many witnesses. And then there was a moment when he was called into ministry before elders who laid hands on him, and he professed not only Jesus as Lord, but Jesus as his Lord and himself as the servant of Christ to preach the truth. And so, Paul reminds him, "Timothy, you made this good confession to be the servant of the Lord, to be the slave of your Master, to be faithful to Him. Now get a grip on eternal life to which you were called."

And here's the separating reality: the man of God is linked to things eternal. He is linked to things eternal. That's where our focus is. Our battle is with the things that have eternal impact. Man of God rises above the petty struggles of politics. Man of God rises above the pitiful, perishing, useless things, and he fights for what is eternal. And what is eternal is divine truth and the souls of men and women. The man of God fights for heaven's causes and the threat of hell. That's the perspective. You have to live in that perspective.

Get a grip on eternal things to which you were called. Can't get caught up in anything less. Might be preaching only one or two times a week. But what are you doing the rest of the time? You're fighting that same battle on another level. You're fighting it by writing a book. You're fighting it by developing a radio program, a television program, or whatever; going to a conference and addressing these kinds of issues. Your whole life is a fight; it's a battle for the truth.

It's such an exhilarating battle that I never get weary. If I don't look in the mirror, I don't know how old I am. I have the same amount of energy that I've always had; and the fight is as exhilarating to me as it's always been, because I've read the end and I know who wins. The victory is already assured. I just want to march in the triumph with my Lord.

One final point, although much more could be said – and I left out all the good stuff. One final point. Man of God is known by what he flees from, what he follows after, what he's fighting for, and then finally, what he is faithful to. That's verses 13 and 14, just quickly because our time is gone. "I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things," – the sovereign Creator of everything and the one who sustains life – "and of Christ Jesus," – the head of the church – "who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate." He said to Pilate – What was His confession before Pilate? – "My kingdom is" – What? – "not of this world."

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“I charge you in the presence of God, the life-giver, and Christ, who faithfully served the kingdom of heaven, that you do the same by keeping the commandment” – *tēn entolēn* – “without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” What is “the commandment”? Is that some specific commandment? Is that some covenant? No. If we had time I could show you how it’s used. But it simply refers to the Word of God. The Word of God is the divine commandment. It’s like saying, “According to the law.” It’s the same thing. It’s the whole revelation of God. Guard it. Guard it “without stain or blemish.”

The man of God is marked because he is faithful before God in whose presence he serves - the Creator and Sustainer of all life. He is faithful before Christ Jesus his Lord and Master, who witnessed His confession of faithfulness to the heavenly kingdom before Pilate. He is faithful to that heavenly kingdom that belongs to God and the Lord Jesus Christ; and he will keep the truth without stain and without blemish. That’s why it says in 1 Timothy that his life has to be “above reproach,” chapter 3, verse 1; Titus 1, his life has to be “above reproach.” It’s an amazing obligation. He will be faithful to the accurate proclamation of divine truth; he’ll get it right. He’ll be faithful, without stain, without reproach, “till the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

How long do you do this? How long are we supposed to be faithful? Until Jesus comes. “Until the *epiphaneia*,” “the shining appearing of Jesus Christ.” He’s coming, and when He comes, verse 15, “At the proper time He will appear, who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see” - referring to God - “to Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.”

The life of a faithful minister has at its end a doxology. That’s how it ought to end. What amazing praise for such a high calling when it’s offered to God as an acceptable sacrifice. Because the man of God is fleeing and following and fighting and faithful, the end of his life is a doxology. The end of his life is going to be praise to God.

There’s another possibility. Go back to 1 Kings chapter 13. There’s a story there about a man of God who was disobedient. I won’t tell you the whole story, but 1 Kings 13, verse 21: “Thus says the Lord,” – to this man of God – “Because you have disobeyed the command of the Lord, and have not observed the commandment which the Lord your God commanded you, but have returned and eaten bread and drunk water in the place of which He said to you, “Eat no bread and drink no water”; your body shall not come to the grave of your fathers.’

“It came about that after he’d eaten bread and after he had drunk, he saddled the donkey for him, for the prophet whom he had brought back. And when he was gone, a lion met him on the way and killed him, and his body was thrown on the road, with the donkey standing beside it.” That’s a snapshot. A corpse with a donkey and a lion flanking. “And behold,” verse 25, “men passed by and saw the body thrown on the road, and the lion standing beside the body; so they came and told it in the city where the old prophet lived.

“Now when the prophet who brought him back from the way heard it, he said, ‘It is the man of God, who disobeyed the command of the Lord; therefore the Lord has given him to the lion, which has torn him and killed him, according to the word of the Lord which He spoke to him.’”

That’s a sad picture, isn’t it? A snapshot of a man of God who ends tragically. I would rather end with a doxology than be a photo of a corpse.

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I've had on my desk a marvelous little statement that I started reading when I was very young. This is what someone suggests for pastors. "Fling him into his office. Tear the office sign from the door and nail on the sign, 'Study!' Take him off the mailing list. Lock him up with his books and his Bible. Slam him down on his knees before Scripture and broken hearts and the lives of a superficial flock and a holy God. Force him to be the one man who knows about God. Throw him into the ring to box with God until he learns how short his arms are. Engage him to wrestle with God all night long. Let him come out only when he's bruised and beaten into being a blessing. Shut his mouth forever spouting remarks, and stop his tongue forever tripping lightly over every nonessential. Require him to have something to say before he dares break the silence.

"Bend his knees in the lonesome valley. Burn his eyes with weary study. Wreck his emotional poise with worry for God. Make him exchange his pious stance for a humble walk with God and man. When at last he dares enter the pulpit, ask him if he has a word from God. If he doesn't, dismiss him. Tell him you can read the morning paper yourself. You can digest the television commentary and think through the day's superficial problems. You can manage the community's weary issues and bless the sordid baked potatoes and green beans ad infinitum better than he can. Command him not to come back until he's read and reread, written and rewritten, until he can stand up, worn and forlorn, and say, 'Thus saith the Lord.'

"Break him across the board of his ill-gotten popularity. Smack him hard with his own prestige. Corner him with questions about God, cover him with demands for celestial wisdom, and give him no escape until he's back against the wall of the Word. And sit down before him and listen to the only word he has left: God's Word.

"Let him be totally ignorant of the down-street gossip, but give him a chapter and order him to walk around in it, camp on it, sup with it, and come at last to speak it backward and forward, until all he says about it rings with the truth of eternity. And when he's done, burned out by the flaming Word, when he's consumed at last by the fiery grace blazing through him, and when he's privileged to translate the truth of God to men and finally transferred from earth to heaven, then bear him away gently, and blow a muted trumpet, and lay him down softly, place a two-edged sword on his coffin, and raise the tune triumphant. For he was a brave soldier of the Word. And ere he died, he had become a man of God." That's the man that we desire to be. That's the man God blesses.

Father, we thank You for meeting with us this morning, as You always do. We thank You for the joy of fellowship and worship. Thank You for Your truth. We thank You for its power in our lives. We thank You for Your empowerment of it by Your Spirit.

Thank You for this incredible church and all that You've done here; we are so grateful to You. We are all the blessed and the undeserving and the unworthy. We are but scraps tied together, sown together in a beautiful quilt to Your glory. Each of us with rough edges, together we can be a doxology to You. Thank You for all that You've done and will continue to do, because You are a God of grace and mercy. Help us to be faithful in every responsibility that we have, to live heavenly lives, to take hold of what is eternal and live for that. Do Your work in each heart, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.