

Fighting the Good Fight

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[0 : 00] We're just about to have our Bible reading, but I'm looking for Mr. and Mrs. Robury. Are they in here? Raise a...

The bush telegraph whispered in my ear that you'd arrived. Well, Willie Phillip told me that you'd arrived. And I was looking around, I couldn't spot you. Just stand up for a moment, and we'll just say, let's all raise a hand and say...

Always great to welcome you back. David and Julie are working in Nigeria and are just here for a short time.

Where are all those children? Downstairs, okay. The girls are downstairs. Great to have you with us. Great to see you. Well, let's turn to 1 Timothy in our Bibles. And if you have the hardback church Bible, you'll find this on page 991.

991. And we're reading the first chapter of this first letter of Paul to his young colleague, the one he calls my child, his protege, Timothy.

[1 : 06] So 1 Timothy, chapter 1. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, to Timothy, my true child in the faith.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith.

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

Now we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully. Understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.

[3 : 06] But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

To the King of Ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. This charge I entrust to you, O Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience.

By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.

[4 : 22] This is the word of the Lord, and may God add his blessing to it for us this evening. Well, let's turn again to 1 Timothy, chapter 1, on page 991 in our Bibles.

Last week, we spent most of the sermon time looking at the author of 1 Timothy, Paul, and I attempted to describe some of the qualities and features and priorities of the apostle Paul. But tonight, I want us to get properly into the text of chapter 1, under the title, fighting the good fight. And if you look at the end of verse 18, you'll see that Paul there is commanding or charging his child Timothy, his protege, to wage the good warfare.

Do you see that phrase? Waging the good warfare. Timothy is at Ephesus. He's temporarily resident there. As Paul puts it in verse 3, his commission there is to remain there, so as to charge certain persons not to teach different doctrine, which means, of course, false doctrine.

So, waging the good warfare is a term that means primarily a matter of teaching the true faith and gagging false alternatives to it.

[5 : 58] If you turn on to chapter 6, verse 12, you'll see that Paul repeats this same commission. 6, 12, fight the good fight of the faith, he says.

And if you turn the page again to 2 Timothy, 2 Timothy, the second letter, chapter 4, verse 7, here is Paul at the very end of his life, and he writes to Timothy, I have fought the good fight.

So this was a term that was deep in his heart and soul. He was looking back here on his life, now coming to an end, and he says, I have fought the good fight. Now, let's notice the word good.

Wage the good warfare. Fight the good fight. A lot of warfare in the world is bad and horrible, but this warfare is good warfare, and Timothy, therefore, does a good thing when he undertakes this kind of battling.

Years ago, when I was a student, I remember a frisson of excitement creeping up my spine as I opened the title page of a book of theology that I was just about to read.

[7 : 07] The author of this book was a fine American professor of theology who died in 1921. His name was B.B. Warfield, Benjamin Warfield, who taught for many years at the Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey.

But the thing that made my spine tingle was not so much the title of the book, but the title given to the author. His title was Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology.

Now, didactic means teaching, but it was the word polemic that thrilled me because the word polemic means battling or warring, and it's a good word for Christians to get into our vocabulary and to use without fear as we discuss the faith with each other.

There is something deeply polemic or polemical about good theology. The very first verse of the Bible is magnificently polemic. In the beginning, God created.

No, he didn't, cries some 21st century materialist atheist. Yes, he did, replies Genesis chapter 1. He created the heavens and the earth, so stick that in your pipe and smoke it.

[8 : 21] There's something polemical about that, isn't there? The whole Bible at one level is a polemic against a false understanding of reality. It's a polemic against the lies and the propaganda of Satan.

Satan spends his time weaving elaborate lies. It's what he does. He's the master of lies or the father of lies, and his lies all concern the nature of reality, and he spends his time getting these lies by a thousand different means into the hearts and minds of human beings, and the Bible polemically counters those lies by telling the world the truth.

Paul the Apostle's ministry was to fight the good fight by teaching the truth about God, and he charges Timothy to do exactly the same thing. Now, the whole of this first letter to Timothy is a powerful encouragement to the younger pastor to do battle or to wage the good warfare.

As I said last week, the letter is also concerned with how to manage and structure the church, how to look after the church family, how to handle the men and the women, the elders and the widows, and so on.

But Paul's major concern here is to do for Timothy what a can of spinach does for Popeye. That is to give him strength, to engage the enemy, to rid the Ephesian church fellowships of the false teaching which was getting into them and spoiling them.

[9 : 47] Now, some of you might be thinking, do I really want to be studying a Bible book which is all about fighting? Don't we get enough about conflict in our news from Monday to Saturday?

Can't we have a quiet rest from it on Sunday? In fact, isn't Sunday supposed to be a day of rest? Surely the Bible is not just about battling for the truth. Now, those are good questions to ask, so let me suggest a three-fold answer to them.

First, sometimes warfare is necessary if peace is to be established. On the human, the more human level, think back to the 1930s.

In the early 1930s when Adolf Hitler first came to power in Germany, he did a great deal to restore Germany's fortunes. The 1920s had been a very tough decade for the Germans.

They were exhausted after the First World War and they experienced a great deal of poverty and deprivation. And when Hitler came to power, at first he seemed to be almost a national saviour.

[10:51] He got the nation working again and prosperity began to increase. But eventually, as the 30s went on, his programme and his tyrannical aspirations became clear and Britain had to declare war not so much on the German people but on the Nazis in 1939.

That war, horrible as it was, had to be waged if Europe was to be saved from tyranny. Now, of course, so much warfare, almost all warfare, is thoroughly wicked and ought not to be engaged in. But occasionally, warfare is necessary and must be engaged in as it was in 1939. And in the same way, Timothy's warfare is a good warfare because not to engage in it would result in great damage and even destruction to the church.

Secondly, Jesus, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, could only establish peace between God and man by doing battle with the devil.

The Apostle John in his first letter wrote this, The reason the Son of God appeared, that's a good way to start a verse, isn't it? Tells us why Jesus came. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.

[12:08] So Jesus came to defeat the devil, to overcome him. He came to dispossess the devil, to rob him of his power, to rob him of his prey. It was at the cross that Jesus decisively defeated the devil.

And we who preach the gospel today are pressing home the victory that Christ has already won. But let's never think of Jesus as anything less than a warrior.

And if he is a warrior, and if he calls us to follow in his footsteps, we too must engage in his warfare. But thirdly, the Bible is much more than a polemical book.

It not only exposes and destroys false teaching, it fills our head with true teaching. That means it causes our souls to magnify the Lord. It rejoices in the truth about the glory of God.

It fills us with love for the Lord Jesus as we come to understand who he is and what he's done. It teaches us to know him. It gives us glimpses of the glory of the world to come.

[13:15] For example, in John's Gospel, chapter 17, Jesus prays to God the Father, Father, I desire that they also whom you have given to me, that means Christians, I desire that they also whom you have given to me may be with me where I am to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

Isn't that a terrific verse? The Bible calls us not only to fight the good fight, it also teaches us to know the Lord and it opens up to us a view of God himself and develops our appetite to be with the Lord Jesus, to see his glory and to share his eternal and glorious home with him.

So it's not all battle, not all battle, far from it, but while we are still in Glasgow, while we are still on the old earth, we must engage in the good warfare with Timothy.

It's a big part, it's an inevitable part of what it means to be a Christian. Well, let's turn now to the text in chapter 1. I want to take it in two main sections.

So first, we'll look at the twisted nature of the false teaching at Ephesus and second, we'll look at the mercy and grace of what Paul calls in verse 11 the glorious gospel of the blessed God.

[14:35] So we'll look at the falsehood first and the truth second. First then, the twisted nature of the false teaching which Timothy has to oppose. At the end of verse 3, Paul calls it different doctrine, heterodox doctrine.

And if you look onto the end of verse 10, you'll see a contrasting phrase and that is sound doctrine. Doctrine which accords, verse 11, with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I, Paul, have been entrusted.

So there's different doctrine and there's sound doctrine, there's false doctrine, and there's healthy, true doctrine. Now, Paul thinks of the gospel, the gospel doctrine, as a defined body of truth.

Elsewhere, he calls it the deposit. So it includes certain things about God and it excludes everything else. And you see how Paul says at the end of verse 11, I have been entrusted with this glorious gospel.

Paul is a steward of this precious and unique body of truth. Or if you like, he's a trustee of it. His responsibility is to guard this truth from distortion and to teach it to Jews and to Gentiles, but particularly to Gentiles.

[16:00] And that's why in chapter 2, verse 7, he reminds Timothy that he's been appointed a preacher and an apostle, a teacher of the Gentiles, the Gentiles in faith and truth. And how did Paul come to receive this defined body, this defined gospel, this gospel teaching?

The answer is largely by divine revelation when the Lord Jesus confronted him and converted him on the road to Damascus. But he also received it from the teaching and the traditions from the apostles before him.

So the Lord has entrusted Paul with this glorious gospel. But Paul is not the sole trustee. Look on to the very end of the letter to chapter 6, verse 20, where he says, O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you.

Entrusted to you. So Timothy also is to be a trustee. And if you look onto the next page to 2 Timothy, chapter 1, verse 14, here is Paul now at the very end of his life and he repeats the command.

2 Timothy 1, 14, by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. So it's a pattern of sound teaching.

[17:19] It's a deposit. The Lord Jesus entrusted it initially to Paul. Paul entrusted it to Timothy. Timothy was also under orders to pass it on to others who would then also pass it on faithfully to others.

And so it comes right down the line of history to us, 20 centuries down to us. And that means that we should regard ourselves today as trustees and guardians of this good deposit, this glorious gospel.

And our responsibility is the same as Timothy's, to pass it on intact, untampered with, to the next generation who will pass it on to future generations until the Lord Jesus returns.

So if people start to teach different doctrine in the churches, it is bound to be a distortion and corruption of the true and glorious gospel. Am I laboring this point to make it plain?

Yes, I hope so because it needs to be labored today. It needs to be labored today because some in the contemporary churches are very squeamish about drawing lines between the true and the false.

[18:24] And many people outside the church in today's world don't like to say that anything is false. They want to say that every viewpoint has its own validity. But Paul could never say that.

In fact, what is happening here in 1 Timothy is exactly what he had warned the Ephesian elders a few years previously would happen when he met them on the beach at Miletus. Acts chapter 20, he'd said this, I know that after my departure from Ephesus, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them.

So, what are these twisted things? In 1 Timothy 1, Paul, in 1 Timothy generally, Paul doesn't go into great detail. He doesn't give us a blow-by-blow account of what these charlatans are saying, but certain features of the false teaching do become pretty clear.

To start with, from chapter 1, verse 4, there's a great interest in what Paul calls myths and genealogies. In fact, he says endless genealogies.

If you look across in the same letter to chapter 4, verse 7, 4-7, you'll see that Paul speaks of irreverent, silly myths. And in chapter 6, verse 20, at the very end, he speaks of the irreverent babble and contradiction of what is falsely called knowledge.

[19:55] So, clearly, there's a great deal of talking going on. It's irreverent babble. It's silly. It's endless. In chapter 1, verse 6, Paul describes it as vain discussion.

In chapter 1, verse 4, he says it leads to speculation. So, the Ephesian church meetings have become hot air factories with leading personalities enjoying the sound of their own voices. Myths means legends or fables, something quite different from the historical truths recorded in the Old Testament. And as for genealogies, well, there are, of course, genealogies in the Old Testament, important ones and truthful ones.

Not endless ones, but ones which are brief and limited and recorded for a good purpose. They describe the members of God's people, the people that God loves, the people with whom he's in covenant.

The ones in early Genesis, for example, are there to show the line of God's election as it works its way through from Adam's son, Seth, down to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

[21 : 03] Now, genealogies of that kind are not endless and they don't lead to speculation. They're recorded so as to bring assurance to later believers that God is surely and certainly working out his purposes as he gathers his people to himself.

In the first century AD, there were various Jewish books in circulation which took aspects of Old Testament history and genealogy but then developed them in all sorts of fanciful directions. For example, there was one book called the Book of Jubilees which dates from about 120 BC which invents names, invents names for all the children of Adam and Eve and of Enoch's family, of Noah's predecessors and descendants and gives names to all the 70 people who went down to Egypt with Jacob and his sons.

If that's not fanciful work, I don't know what is. But if you stretch your imagination a little bit, I think you can see why this kind of thing could appear to be interesting to some people.

In a world where books were very scarce and of course there was no information available on the internet, a certain type of mind might think that it was godly to invent lots of names and people who were not actually mentioned in the Old Testament.

[22 : 25] You can imagine perhaps a family gathering together and the father of the family says, let's play a game, a game I've just invented. It's not Monopoly, it's not Cluedo, it's called Old Testament creativity.

It's good for children, it develops the godly imagination of the growing child. What we do is we take Old Testament stories and genealogies and we develop them. We're adding in this way to the power of the word of God.

Now in a similar way, a number of bizarre accounts of the life of Jesus also appeared in the first century AD, quite different from the historically accurate records of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. What it boils down to, I think, is this. There's a certain type of mind, a certain type of thinking, which is not happy to say, the Bible as we have it is sufficient.

The Bible is all we need. It wants to create weird and wonderful alternatives. And what does all this do? Well, look at verse 4. It promotes speculations rather than the stewardship, which means the perfect plan that comes from God and is to be received by faith.

[23 : 40] So people in effect are saying, we're not happy to trust the biblical revelation of God's gospel, we'd prefer to speculate. Now there's another element to this, which at first sight seems rather surprising.

Look on to verse 7. These false religionists, says Paul, are desiring to be teachers of the law. Now the law here means, of course, the law of God, the law of Moses.

So they're presenting themselves as being still somehow in the great tradition of Abraham and Moses. But, says Paul in verse 7, they don't understand what they're saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

So the question is, how could they be combining their myths and genealogies with an outward profession of teaching the law of God? Well, I think we can see how this might happen in the examples I've already quoted.

They get together and they say, for example, let's take something from the law of Moses. We're Bible people. Let's explore scripture now. Let's open up new pathways of understanding.

[24 : 47] So for example, let's imagine we're with Jacob. Jacob in the land of Canaan when the great famine breaks and they're in great trouble. Think of Jacob's grandchildren. Dozens of them.

Dozens. Their fathers, the 12 sons of Jacob, they're away for weeks. They've gone down to Egypt to buy corn. But everybody back at home, everyone's so hungry.

Think of the little children. They're running to their mothers crying for food. Let's think our way empathetically into the story. Let's give these little ones names. Let's write down their names and we'll build up more of a 3D picture of what was going on there.

So they devised these genealogies and made imaginative stories and thought that by doing so, they were getting more deeply into the Old Testament law.

The written words of Moses were not enough for them. They thought they could improve on the word of God by adding to it. They prided themselves on being teachers of the law, as verse 7 puts it.

[25 : 50] But Paul knew that they were uttering nonsense and didn't understand what they were talking about because they didn't understand the purpose of the law of Moses. And Paul goes on in verses 8, 9, and 10 to remind Timothy of the proper use of the law of God.

So he says in verse 8, Now we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.

In other words, Paul is saying, the purpose of the law is fundamentally moral. It was never given by God for foolish people to speculate about it and use it as a basis for creating silly stories and inventing lists of names.

It was given for a completely serious purpose, to expose sin and to restrain sin. Let me just leave the text for a moment and give you three points very briefly on the purpose of the Old Testament law, one of which Paul is emphasizing here.

The law of God was given first to restrain sin. Here's an example. I'm walking down the road. It's September or October. I see my neighbor's orchard.

[27 : 24] There's a lovely apple there. I'm just about to steal my neighbor's apple. But just before I pluck it from the tree, I think, God says, thou shalt not steal. So I don't steal.

The law restrains me from sin. Secondly, the law convicts us of our sinfulness and makes us turn to Christ for forgiveness and salvation.

So we read the law carefully and we cry out, I'm a sinner. I need to be saved. I turn to Christ. Third, the law teaches us how to live a godly life.

It shows us that the blessed and happy life does not murder people, does not commit adultery, does not tell lies, does not worship idols, and so on. So the purpose of the law is to restrain sin, to convict us of sin, and to teach us godly living.

Now in verses 8, 9, and 10 here, it's the first of those three purposes that Paul is emphasizing, that perhaps the other two are being hinted at as well. But Paul is saying the law is serious.

[28 : 30] It's about God and man and the way people live. It's about behavior. As he says in verse 8, the law is good as long as one uses it lawfully, as long as one uses it in the way that God designs it to be used.

But the way these quack people are using it is disastrous. They're frivolous. They're silly. They're not taking it seriously at all. So do you see the picture that's emerging?

These people are claiming to be Bible teachers, but they're misreading, misusing, and misunderstanding their Bibles. The law of Moses, the fundamental building block of the whole Bible, is serious.

But these people are treating it as if it's something to play with. Now there's something very contemporary about this. It's just the kind of thing that goes on in some popular liberal theology today.

I'm sure that many of you will have been to churches where you've heard teaching which professes to be teaching from the Bible, but is really nothing of the sort, and is actually treating the Bible frivolously, in a silly manner.

[29 : 38] I'll give you just one example of this. Early in Matthew's gospel, in Matthew chapter 2, no need to turn this up, you'll know it, Matthew tells us that Joseph and Mary flee down to Egypt with the infant Jesus soon after his birth so as to escape the persecution of Herod, who's killing all the little boys in the Bethlehem area.

And Matthew tells the story of them going down to Egypt and then returning. And he ends this very short section by saying, this was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet Hosea, out of Egypt I've called my son.

Now I once heard a short liberal sermon on that passage, and the message of this liberal sermon was this, Jesus knows what it's like to be a refugee, so let's care for the many refugees who are in the world today.

Now, of course it is good for Christians to care for refugees, but that's not what Matthew is talking about or teaching here at all.

Matthew is showing us how Jesus fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament and how the pattern of his life repeats and fulfills the pattern of the life of the people of Israel because they went down to

Egypt in hard times and then returned to the promised land.

[31 : 00] And Jesus does exactly the same. So Matthew's point is that Jesus fulfills everything that the law and the prophets pointed to. Jesus is Israel.

He is Israel and therefore we can and we must receive him as the king of Israel, as the king of God's people. So the message of that passage is let's believe the Old Testament promises and bow down before the wonderful king who has come to fulfill them.

Now the question is why does the liberal preacher say that this passage is about caring for refugees? The answer is that he doesn't really want to engage with what the Bible teaches about God.

His view of reality is man-centered. What he's really interested in is human behavior. He wants to teach ethical lessons about what it means to be a mature and balanced human being.

Now it's very good for us to learn about being mature and balanced. I could do with a bit more maturity and balance myself and so could you. And the Bible does teach us how to be more mature and loving people.

[32 : 10] But that is not the center of the Bible's teaching. The Bible first and foremost and overwhelmingly is about God. About how God is working out his glorious purpose in the history of Israel and in the coming of Christ who is the king and savior.

Why then should the liberal preacher not want to engage with God as God presents himself to us in the Bible? The answer is because he doesn't like the truth about God.

The true God calls him to acknowledge his sinfulness and his moral bankruptcy but he can't bear to acknowledge it. The true God calls him to repent and to humble himself and to cry out for mercy.

But he doesn't want to say to God God be merciful to me a sinner. The true God tells him that Christ will return to judge the living and the dead and to separate forever the lost from the saved.

But he can't bear to think that God might send anybody to everlasting perdition. To engage with the real storyline of the Bible means accepting the seriousness of sin the anger of God against it the need for a propitiatory sacrifice to be offered to God so as to deal with our sin than the need for repentance repentance for faith in Christ for new birth and a conviction of the coming of the day of judgment.

[33 : 39] But the liberal preacher can't bear to engage with those things because they are too humbling. So he only picks out little pieces of the Bible to help his listeners to live a better and more loving human life.

So his teaching professes to be Bible teaching. He reads Bible passages out loud in church. He refers to Bible verses in his sermons. But he's using the Bible frivolously and not seriously.

He's like these Ephesian false teachers in verse 7. They desire to be teachers of the law of God.

They profess to be teachers of the law. But, says Paul, they don't know what they're talking about.

And the net result is speculation, vain discussion, and the destruction of the church. And that is the kind of teaching, to go back to verse 3, that Paul urges Timothy to root out of the Ephesian churches.

Well, let's look secondly at the real gospel in verses 12 to 17. Not that Paul details every aspect of the real gospel here in this paragraph, but he includes these few sentences here to remind Timothy of how deeply different the true teaching is from the false.

[34 : 55] The true is as lovely and wholesome as the false is destructive and damaging. In verse 11, just look at this lovely phrase, Paul speaks of the glorious gospel, the glorious gospel of the blessed God.

Let's notice three things about it. First, Paul's culpable degradation, or if you like, his shameful sinfulness. Now, this is a very personal passage about Paul, one of the most personal he wrote.

In verse 13 here, Paul describes his past life in a way that we find nowhere else in his letters.

Formerly, he says, I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent opponent.

And the word he uses for insolent opponent means a person who is filled to the brim with arrogance and pride. You often hear the word hubris, don't you, on the radio these days, hubris.

Well, this word is hubristes, somebody who's bristling with arrogance and pride. Listen to these words that Paul spoke in his defense before King Agrippa, back in Acts chapter 26.

[36 : 03] He said to the king, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. I not only locked up many of the saints, the Christians in prison, but when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.

I punished them often and tried to make them blaspheme and in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. Paul says this with sadness and shame. He surely never forgot the day of Stephen's death and how he had aided the executioners of that lovely and courageous Christian. And just notice the way Paul thinks of himself. Verse 13, formerly, once upon a time, I was a blasphemer. I was. Now look at verse 15, sinners of whom I am the foremost.

I was a blasphemer. I am a foremost, the foremost sinner. I'm no longer a blasphemer and a persecutor. That's gone. But I am to this day the chief of sinners. So here was a man who looked with pain and sorrow and yet with clear sight into the depths of his dark heart and he was willing to acknowledge both what he once was and what he still was.

[37 : 25] John Newton wrote those words, amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a... When you look into the depths of your own heart, what do you see?

Saved a very nice, friendly, kind person. Or do you see, do I see what John Newton saw? Paul looked into his heart and he saw the foremost of sinners.

If you or I ever get to the point of thinking, I was a sinner but I'm not one now, we'll be in grave danger of losing sight of the power and loveliness of the gospel.

When we're Christians, we are forgiven sinners, but we're still sinners. So there's the first thing, Paul's culpable degradation. Secondly, let's see Christ's overflowing grace.

Verse 13, but I received mercy because I'd acted ignorantly in unbelief. He's not, I think, excusing himself there. His ignorance, after all, was willful and his unbelief was aggressively rebellious.

[38 : 29] But he says, the Lord had mercy on him. And verse 14, the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Paul deserved condemnation, but he received mercy. And that is the story of every single Christian. We deserve condemnation, but we receive mercy.

And look back to the first three words of verse 12. I thank him. I thank him for all this. let's pray that the Lord will fill our hearts to our dying day with thankfulness, that although we deserved condemnation, we have received mercy.

And as Paul puts it in verse 14, the grace of our Lord overflowed. It's like the Nile bursting its banks. The Lord is lavish in his forgiveness, lavish in pouring out upon us the love and cherishing and restoration and remaking that lifts us out of despair and condemnation and lifts us finally into his very presence in heaven.

And then notice verse 15. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to, and we noticed earlier, the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.

[39 : 51] Well, here's another verse that tells us why he came. He came into the world to save sinners. Isn't that clear and delightful? Are you a sinner? Yes is the answer.

Then Christ came to save you. If you're not yet a Christian, don't resist him. Let him rescue you. Let him have you. We all need rescue.

Years ago, when my oldest son was six years old, he's 30 something now, so he was a little boy of six, we were on holiday on the west coast of Wales, and he was always very keen on fishing. Dad, he said, can we go fishing? I said, yes, we can. So we hired, I hired a little rowing boat, and it was a lovely, calm morning. You know that sort of morning? Get it on the west coast of Scotland. Blue sky, sunshine, no sign of rain anyway. It was a lovely, calm morning. So we rowed out, we got some fishing tackle, and I got myself the right way round of the boat, and off we went, about half a mile out into the open sea.

[40 : 53] Very calm, lovely. We fished for half an hour, caught nothing. Then I said to my boy, it's time to go home, it's lunchtime. So I turned the boat round and began to row back. And at that very moment, an offshore breeze sprang up.

Do you know what I mean? And I was reasonably young and fit at the time, but I rowed and rowed and rowed, and the breeze just got stronger and stronger, and I could not go on.

So I turned around, I looked to shore, and I waved like this. And the guy who'd hired us to the boat, fortunately, noticed, I guess he kept his eye on us all the time. And he hopped into his motor launch, came out there, and within five minutes we were whisked back in.

What would I have, when he arrived, what should I have said to him? Go away, I don't need you. No. I said, thank you very much. And we were quickly back to safety.

We needed to be rescued. Otherwise we'd have been blown out to sea. That would have been the end of us. All of us need to be rescued. The plight of man is worse than an offshore wind.

[41 : 58] Jesus came into the world to save condemned sinners. He knows how to do it. It's his business. He's been doing it for a long time. Thirdly, Paul speaks of Christ's rescue of him as being an example for others.

Look at verse 16. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost of sinners, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

In other words, we look at the way that the Lord rescued Paul, this blasphemer, and we say, well, if he's willing to rescue the world's foremost sinner, this blasphemer and persecutor, then there's nobody that he won't be willing to rescue.

There might be somebody here tonight who thinks, I am unrescuable. I'm beyond everything. I've been a willful, stubborn, hardened sinner. I've done unspeakable things.

I've adopted the cruelest and most callous attitudes towards other people. I've hated God and I've hated man. Could I be forgiven? Could I be forgiven?

[43 : 12] Paul says, you can be forgiven. Paul is saying, if he rescued a man like me, he's willing to rescue a man or a woman like you.

So come to him. Just look back over these two sections of the chapter. The section about the false teaching and the section about the glorious gospel.

They could not be more different from each other. The false teaching, it has the smell of death on it. It leads to vain discussion and silly talk. But this glorious gospel displays to the world the mercy, the grace, the love, and the patience of the Lord Jesus to those like us who deserve no mercy.

No wonder Paul begins this section with the words, I thank him. And no wonder he ends it by saying in verse 17, to the king of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, the honor and glory forever and ever.

Amen. And that, friends, is a gospel worth fighting for. Let's pray together. We do thank you, our gracious God, that Timothy was willing to fight the good fight and to wage the good warfare.

[44 : 37] We thank you for so many who, out of love for human beings, have been prepared to fight that good fight as well, proclaiming the wonderful saving truth and resisting what is false and what can not lead to salvation.

So please help us in our day, in our generation, to be glad, fight us for truth, and help us, dear Father, to rejoice more and more deeply in this wonderful, abundant, lavish salvation that you have poured out upon people like Paul and people like all of us who are sinners, and yet who turn to you for grace, mercy, and salvation.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.