

Fight to Win

Growing up in the early fifties and sixties was interesting, especially considering the times we live in now. My parents were products of the late twenties and thirties and their experiences colored how they applied God's word, after they came to God, in their lives. They had gone through the great depression, came to California during the great dust bowl migration looking for a better way of life and an opportunity to make a better life for their children. Mom worked at a paraplegic hospital during the war and dad was wounded serving as a medic corpsman in the Marines. The circumstances of their lives, when molded by God's truth, dictated how they raised their children. They were strict disciplinarians, knowing that someone who was out of control could not survive the chaos, were there to be another war or depression. They taught love and compassion to their children, knowing that in the blink of an eye it can all disappear, and they taught us to be strong, to stand for what we believe, to live what we believe, and to not back down in the face of opposition. I will never forget my father telling me that if I were to ever be in a fight that I started, I would be in major trouble, and you didn't want to be in even minor trouble with my father, but seemingly in contradiction to that, he said that if someone else were to start the fight, I had better finish it. **1** Those thoughts would not be appropriate today. I'm pretty confident they were not appropriate then, but I do understand where they came from.

Heb 12:1

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1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

The Hebrew writer tells us to set aside all encumbrances and be prepared to run the race before us. And in...

1 Tim 6:12

3

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.

Should a Christian fight? In...

John 18:36

4

36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm."

Paul says we are to fight the good fight. Obviously the contexts of the two statements dictate how they are to be understood. Christ made his statement in the face of armed soldiers coming to take him and Peter raising his sword to fight an earthly battle to save Christ, when He had to be

taken to be crucified. Paul makes his statement to Christians who were combating false teaching, lies, and Satan's warring.

Should a Christian fight, absolutely, in the context that we are to contend earnestly for the faith? While I didn't understand it at the time, what my father was trying to teach us is that there is no virtue in mere fighting. There is no honor in fighting to just fight, or because you feel that someone may have slighted you or because someone has the audacity to differ with you on some point. One who fights for the sake and pleasure of fighting wastes his life.

Fighting must have a cause to be worthwhile, and unfortunately sometimes fighting is necessary for the Christian because of sin in our world.

Rom 5:12

5

12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned

Paul's statement speaks to the commitment that we make to be a child of God. The point is that a person, who does not fight for or against anything, is a person who stands for nothing. Because there are those who have no principles, those who have principles must stand up against them while at the same time standing up for their principles. Our world is divided into those who insist on being enemies of God and those who have made their peace with God.

Rom 5:1

6

1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

Because both evil and good exist in our world, conflict is inevitable. This is one kind of battle, fighting for the truth against outside attacks.

A second kind of battle might better be termed a race for excellence, which is how it is described in...

Heb 12:1

X

1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

The unbelievers are in a race to see who will accomplish more evil, though I am sure that is not their intention, and the believers are in another race altogether to get to Christ.

The word translated as "race" comes from the Greek *agôn*, from which *agônizomai* is derived, this is where the English word "agonize" comes from. The same Greek word is what we render in English as "fight" and "race" or "endeavor to be first, to excel, and to succeed." Both ideas can have a positive or negative connotation. The context seems to be the determining factor. If the motive is right then it is good. Fighting evil for the glory of God is good. Fighting your brother to put him down so you can be proud of being first is evil. However, if you are striving for excellence or to teach others to follow the example of Christ and the teachings of the word, then running a race

is good. This word agôn, "fight" or "race" is derived from the verb ágœ, "to lead." Thus the meaning behind the word is to strive to lead or be at the front of the race or fight against Satan and the evils of the world, while at the same time diligently working towards a home in heaven.

A life of faith is all too often a life of conflict. Look at those who had faith in God that are enumerated in **Hebrews 11** and you will see that every one of them had conflict in their lives. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, all had difficulties, trials, and conflict in their lives. None were exempt from conflicts and sufferings. The conflicts occurred because of the presence of sin in the world, in them, and the presence of other sinful people in their lives.

The world has not changed. These same circumstances surround us in spite of Christ's coming into the world. Remember that Christ came to give man an opportunity to be saved from his sin, not to remove sin from the world. Part of this battle that is being fought is seen in...

2 Cor 4:3-4

7

3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, **4** in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Satan, the God of this world, is seeking to blind the minds of the unbelieving so they can't see the light of the Gospel. That is the battle we are in, fighting for our soul against the enemy that is the Devil. There will be conflicts as long as we live since we are not an island unto ourselves.

God wants all men to repent and to come to Him through Christ, and that battle has been going since the beginning. Satan deceived Adam and Eve, applauded when Cain killed Abel, and promoted the evil that caused God to destroy the world in the days of Noah. The faithful of God are His spearhead in that battle and always have been. Their work will remain incomplete unless we shoulder our responsibility in the conflict. Note how the eleventh chapter of Hebrews ends...

Heb 11:39-40

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39 And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, **40** because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.

Interesting concept, that the work of the faithful of old is completed in the work of the faithful of today. That phrase "be made perfect," from the Greek teleiœthôsi, means that their work can not be completed without our labor for God. This shouldn't be difficult to understand. The faithful of old did their best to bring others to God, to help instill in others faith. Noah preached for 120 years to try and get people to repent and return to God. Jonah was sent to Ninevah to preach repentance, Joshua stood before Israel and declared that he and his family would worship God. The faithful of old worked diligently to maintain their faith and to teach others and their work is made complete whenever anyone comes to God through a faithful obedience to His word, validating their efforts as well as ours. They fought the good fight, as should we.

Remember our earlier point, that a person, who does not fight for or against anything, is a person who stands for nothing.

If you and I are determined to avoid conflict we will not do what needs to be done. If you and I don't have the courage of our convictions we will cut and run. If we are unwilling to fight the good fight then maybe we aren't as convicted and committed as we think we are.

Rom 1:16 9

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

This is a passage we are all familiar with, and Paul reiterates the same thought in...

2 Tim 1:8 10

8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God,

Paul makes our point. There is a battle being waged between the love of God working in our hearts and the desires of the flesh that Satan uses to draw us away from God and we have a part to play in that battle just as the faithful of old did. We have to put the finishing touches on what others have done in that battle. If they did what they did because it was their God-given responsibility, and consequently endured conflict for doing so, shouldn't we do the same?

You and I cannot do anything worthwhile without engaging in conflict and the resulting sufferings.

The teaching that Christianity is a walk in a rosy garden isn't what the scriptures teach, nor, for that matter, is the "Peace that passes all understanding." They are, instead, a peace in the heart in spite of the conflict around us...

John 16:33 11

33 "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."

Christianity is peace between God and us and leads to a peaceful attitude. However, the attitude of others toward God may affect this peace, or at least the comfort that we find in it. When others are slothful in their work, we need to move forward, not rejoicing in leaving them behind, but encouraging them to move forward with us. That is Paul's point when he says to run the race set before us.

Phil 2:12-13 12

12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; **13** for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

Friends, if we are to succeed in this, we must work out our salvation by allowing God to work in us, through His word, as we fight Satan at every turn, striving to spread the Gospel to all we meet.

We must not fight sitting down, nor walking, but running, working hard to achieve the goal. Life is a race, and only the one who runs gets to the goal. Here is the real impact of that statement, if we do not reach the goal, it means we did not run, and it is never too late to start.

13 "Let us run" comes from the Greek "tréchœmen," and it means:

1. A present ongoing effort. We can never say, "I ran and I reached my goal."
2. A continuous race. Every goal reached reveals another loftier goal to be reached.
3. A personal responsibility. No one can run our race for us and we can't run someone else's for them.

There is another point to be made; our race, our battle, is difficult enough without having unnecessary distractions or burdens.

When I was in high school and high jumping on the track team we would strap weight to our ankles and run and jump with them as a part of our training. But when it came time to compete we unburdened ourselves so that we could compete at the highest level. Try picking up one hundred pounds and start running, you will not get very far.

Heb 12:1

14

12 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

Put off every encumbrance. Vines tells us that the word translated encumbrance comes from the Greek;

Onkos (NT:3591)

15

Denotes "a bulk or mass"; hence, metaphorically, "an encumbrance, weight," **Heb 12:1**

The word for "weight" is ógkos or ónkos from which comes the English word "oncology," the study of tumors. There are malignant tumors that attack our healthy spiritual organisms. We should examine ourselves for spiritual tumors. The sooner we discover them and have them excised, the faster we can run the race. We need to be careful lest any habit become a malignant tumor. The word ógkos does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament.

Brethren we are in a fight. We have described that fight as being two-fold. One, we are fighting against the world and the attacks it makes on the Church and the word. We are now the spearhead of God's army in that battle. And two, we are in a spiritual life and death battle as individuals, as we contend every minute of every day with Satan as he tries to deter us from our goal.

I would end by offering my father's advice; don't go looking for sinful trouble, but be prepared to fight the fight and run the race set before you by, as we saw in Phil. Allowing God to work in us.