

**Christ Community Covenant Church**  
**The Little Letters—1Timothy**  
In the Good Fight of Faith Character Matters  
*1Timothy 6:11-12*  
Pastor Mike Brown – February 20, 2011

**Opening Prayer**

**Introduction**

Today we begin looking in depth at the “little letters” of the Bible. These are the short epistles at the end of the New Testament. You may have heard the term “epistles,” it simply means “letters.” So, over the next few weeks we are going to be examining the little letters in the back of the New Testament. These are letters written by Paul, Peter, the Apostle John, and Jesus’ brothers James and Jude.

Today and next week, we are going to take a closer look at three specific letters called the Pastoral Epistles, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. Unlike most of the other letters, these three are written to individuals, specifically to pastors. Timothy and Titus are pastoring local churches: Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete. These letters are intensely practical, unlike some of Paul’s other letters that can be quite theological.

Specifically today, we are going to be in 1 Timothy and we will stick our toes in Titus because they were written for the same reason: for Paul to encourage Timothy and Titus and to express his concern for the churches in Ephesus and Crete they are overseeing.

**Setting the Stage**

I find it extremely helpful to understand the context in which these various authors are writing. Seeing them as real people in the context of their time in history helps me better understand these letters. So, here is a quick timeline of Paul’s travels that may help you with these letters (approximate dates):

- AD 50: Paul begins his second missionary journey
  - Paul meets Timothy in Derby/Lystra area—Acts 16:1
  - They begin traveling together
- AD 60: Paul imprisoned in Rome
  - Acts 28:16; Acts ends the story here
- AD 62: Paul released from prison
- AD 63-67: Another missionary journey
  - Leaves Titus in Crete and Timothy in Ephesus
  - AD 63: Paul writes Timothy and Titus
  - Perhaps Paul goes on to Spain and Briton
- AD 67: Paul imprisoned again in Rome
  - Writes last letter to Timothy
- AD 68: Paul executed by Nero

So, when Paul writes this first letter to Timothy, he is a man perhaps in his early 60s, having been a Christian for maybe 30 years. This painting by Rembrandt captures exactly the way I think of Paul in these later years.

**Rembrandt painting**

As Paul writes this first letter, he and Timothy have known each other for about 13 years. During that time they have developed a very close relationship as evidenced by Paul’s repeated reference to Timothy as his son (e.g., 1 Tim 1:2). By the time of this writing, Paul has left Timothy in Ephesus to

oversee a troubled church, one battered by false teachings. So, Paul writes to remind Timothy about being wary of the false teachers, some issues of church structure, how the church is to minister to widows, and a great deal about the character of church-goers.

I want to dwell on the issue of character.

### Character—What is the Fuss?

As Paul begins to close his letter to Timothy, he begins to speak quite fatherly to him. One can easily image his tone of voice as he encourages Timothy with all of the love he has for him to persevere in the work to which he has been called. Speaking of the teaching of the false teachers and the pull of worldly comfort and desire for riches of Christians, he says this:

*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. (1 Timothy 6:11–12, NAS)*

“Fight the good fight of faith.” When was the last time you encouraged a fellow believer using those words? (reference to *Onward Christian Soldiers*) Fight the good fight of faith—Paul often uses war or athletic metaphors—what does that mean, exactly? In the previous verse (v11), Paul tells us...it is “pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness.” (Paul often uses multiple complementary words to get his idea across.) At its essence, he is talking about fighting against the temptations to live a life of righteousness, which in this context means an upright life, a life of good character. Righteousness, you see, is really just a particular form of character; it is a life imitating the character of God. So, Paul is urging his son Timothy, like any father who wants the best for his son, to live a life of good character, the character of Christ.

Let’s stop here for a minute to define our terms and ask some important questions. Exactly what is character? And, in today’s culture, does character even matter anymore or is it an old, unfashionable notion? Here is what you had to say about it...

### Character Video

Comments on the video...

Listen to what a few people throughout history have said regarding character:

Character is simply habit long continued.

— Plutarch, Greek biographer (47-120 A.D.)

The best index to a person’s character is (a) how he treats people who can’t do him any good, and (b) how he treats people who can’t fight back.

— Abigail van Buren (Pauline Esther Friedman), American newspaper advice columnist (1918-2002)

Most people say that it is the intellect which makes a great scientist. They are wrong: it is character.

— Albert Einstein, Swiss-American mathematician, physicist and public philosopher (1879-1955)

It is with trifles, and when he is off guard, that a man best reveals his character.

— Arthur Schopenhauer, German philosopher (1788-1860)

The measure of a man's character is what he would do if he knew he never would be found out.

— Baron Thomas Babington Macauley, English historian and statesman (1800-1859)

If a man has any greatness in him, it comes to light, not in one flamboyant hour, but in the ledger of his daily work.

— Beryl Markham, English adventurer and author (1902-1986)

In many of Paul’s letters, good character, in the form of imitating the righteousness of God, is very important. Let’s look at positive and negative examples in 1 Timothy alone:

- 1:3-4, 8-10
- 2:1-2; 9-10

- 3:2-3; 8, 11
- 4:11

In the Timothy verses, Paul is speaking out against false teachers, and speaking to church office-holders, including ministers. Against false teachers he warns among other things not to be lazy—not fighting the good fight—by falling into idle speculation. In other words, the Christian life is one of self-discipline; fighting the good fight, persevering to the end, running the good race. To church office holders and ministers, he is making the point that good character—God’s righteousness—is what demonstrates fitness for the church office.

This idea—that good character demonstrates fitness for office—is mostly foreign to our culture today where in politics we tend to vote for the person who furthers our agenda, regardless of character—the most dramatic recent example of that being President Clinton, where his supporters, deathly afraid of losing the White House to the other party after his affair was revealed, said that character doesn’t matter in the Office of the President, it is only about the decisions. Similarly, in athletics we see that winning isn’t everything, it is the only thing, to the exclusion of the character of the athlete or owner. In the business world it is so often about the bottom line, not the character of the workers.

Here are a few other verses from Paul:

- 1 Timothy 6:9
- Galatians 5:19-23
- Romans 1:28-32; 12:9-21
- Many others...

In these verses, Paul goes beyond false teachers and church office-holders, giving examples and counter-examples of the sort of Christ-like righteous behavior every Christian should strive toward. Why does Paul insist on us to strive for this character of God in us? Let’s look at one last list of traits:

- 1 Thessalonians 4:2-7 (not called to a life of impurity)

If character matters to us for no other reason, it matters for this reason: God has called us to live a life imitating His character; *our character matters to God so it must matter to us*. To make the point, listen to Peter:

- 1 Peter 1:13-16 (Leviticus 11:44)

### “Character” of Paul

Paul was clearly concerned with his own character. Writing to the church in Corinth he says this about his own fighting the good fight to live a life imitating God:

- 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

To the church in Philippi he describes the journey we are each on:

- Philippians 3:12-15

Timothy spent years observing Paul strive to live a life of upright character. In fact, Paul was so bold as to challenge those he knew to follow him; not out of his own arrogance, but from his realization that sometimes we need to see how it is done; we need a living example.

- 1 Corinthians 11:1

In this verse we hear that Paul kept the order correct: “follow me, but only because I am following Christ.” Again, we don’t talk this way today. How many of us would dare to say that to another believer, “Follow me as I follow Christ?” Perhaps some of you...but do we think so little of ourselves or the promises of Christ that we are afraid to boldly say, “follow me as I follow Christ”?

### Does Character Matter Today?

I think we have seen that the answer to this question for a Christian must be an emphatic “yes!” because our character matters to God. But why? Why is the formation of our character into that of Christ so important?

To begin to answer that question we have to ask other questions: Is this all there is to Christianity, a lists of do’s and don’ts? Is God just like a parent who says “do this” or “do that” because I said so?

That is what many unbelievers would have us believe about God, he is a spoil-sport only interested in us following rules. That is what the serpent in the Garden of Eden so many years ago got Adam and Eve to believe.

I believe that the key to understanding the seeming list of do’s and don’ts lies in what Jesus told us is the path to being saved. He said simply, “Follow me.” Follow Christ. This is what Jesus told us to do and where Paul has grounded his understanding of righteousness, of upright character. To understand this, let’s take a quick look at the Sermon on the Mount.

Very early on in this Sermon, Jesus says “Your righteousness—your character—must exceed that of the Pharisees.” How can that be? The Pharisees were very upright in their outward behavior. They were experts in the do’s and don’ts of religion.

And then, of course, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus raises the bar for the do’s and don’ts. In a series of statements, He says, “You have heard...but I say...” And then raises the bar by going further with His description of good character.

So, clearly Jesus was all about behavior lists, too, right? Yes, but not so fast. Look at what He says at the end of the Sermon:

- Matthew 7:15-23

Jesus spends nearly three chapters preaching about good character, and then says that good character by itself is not enough! It is true that our behavior matters; otherwise, Jesus, Paul, and the rest of the Bible wouldn’t speak of it so frequently. Jesus himself says that our upright character is the fruit of our commitment to Him when He says several times, “If you love me you will keep my commands” (John 14:15).

Back to the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew 7:21-23. “Some of you will say to me, ‘Look what I did!’ And, I (Jesus) will say to you, ‘I don’t know you.’” This statement by Jesus frightens many people because we think we won’t know whether we are saved. Jesus pulls the rug out from under our works-based salvation. Paul gives us the answer:

- Luke 11:42
- 1 Corinthians 8:3

Love is the foundation. “To love God is to be known by God.” In these words of Paul we should hear the greatest commandment: “Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind” (Matthew 22:37).

Our character is important to God; it is the way in which we can measure our commitment to the relationship with God, but it is not the end-all. Ask yourself another question: “Why did God put the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden and then forbid Adam and Eve to eat from it? Why give them a temptation in the first place?

Because without sacrifice there is no love. A relationship completely on my terms and conditions is no relationship at all, it is slavery. Love requires sacrifice. We read that God is love (1 John 16); God sacrificed for us. Scripture tells us that He is longsuffering over us because He loves us (e.g., Exodus 34:6). He died for us; the ultimate sacrifice: “there is no greater love than to die for another” (John 15:13).

Paul left Timothy at the church in Ephesus. How did Timothy do? Well, we have a record.

- Revelation 2:1-4 (recall Luke 11:43)

They did exactly as Paul urged Timothy to teach them: they were doing good deeds, identifying false prophets, and persevering, but they had become entrenched in doing *things*, forgetting to do these things out of love for God.

So, it comes down to love. We strive for God’s righteousness—God’s good character—because it is about a loving relationship with God. We sacrifice—dying to ourselves and our own selfishness—willingly because we love God, and sometimes unwillingly because God loves us. And when we don’t do so well—when we sin—God forgives us. Forgiveness is an act of love because it requires the one wronged—God—to sacrifice by releasing the offender—us—from the guilt of the offense.

Near the end of 1 Timothy, Paul says this:

*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...* (1 Timothy 6:13–14, NAS)

The writer of Hebrews is much more forceful:  
*You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin...* (Hebrews 12:4, NAS)

So, 4Cs, I charge you to fight the good fight, to strive to live a life of good character, of God's righteousness. And not out of a sense of following some set of rules, but out of your love for God. Fight the good fight and follow Jesus. And if you don't know how, then follow me or any of the other great saints we have in this congregation.

Offering
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Benediction
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**RALPH WALDO EMERSON (1803-1882) -- American writer and philosopher**

"The true test of civilization is not the census, nor the size of cities, nor the crops - no, but the kind of man the country turns out."