

The Marks of a Mature Christian

1 Timothy 6:11-16

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 17, 2018

Introduction

- ❖ For the past few months we've been working through this book of 1 Timothy, and we're nearing the finish line. I find this morning's passage to be a good summary of the entire letter. **Here we come across a direct charge from Paul to Timothy, which is fitting since this letter is essentially one big charge to Timothy – for him to faithfully carry out his pastoral duties in the church of Ephesus.**
 - Timothy was responsible to stay in Ephesus to pastor a troubled church. One where false teachers had infiltrated and were teaching heresy and creating controversy. **Paul knew this was going to be a difficult task for Timothy – not only because he was young (4:12), but because he didn't share Paul's temperament.** In his second letter, Paul had to encourage Timothy to not be ashamed of the gospel (2 Tim. 1:8) and to remember that God gave him a spirit not of fear or cowardice but of power, love, and self-control (2 Tim. 1:7)
 - **So at the close of this letter, what Timothy needs most is to hear a strong word from his discipler.** He needs to hear a charge to remain faithful to his God-given calling to lead this church – to help it become a pillar of gospel truth in the city of Ephesus. And that's what he gets in chapter 6:11-16.

- ❖ **What Paul does is to charge Timothy to conduct himself in such a way – to live a certain kind of life – that stands in stark contrast to the false teachers.** He wants Timothy to be different. Look at v11, *"But as for you."* They're teaching different doctrine. *But as for you.* They're puffed up with conceit and yet know nothing. *But as for you.* They have an unhealthy craving for controversy. *But as for you.* They're driven by the love of money imagining godliness is a means of financial gain. *"But as for you, O man of God."*
 - Now that's not a casual, throwaway label. **Man of God is a loaded phrase, especially in the OT.** Only a few men received that honored title. It was reserved for men like Moses (Deut. 33:1), David (Neh. 12:24), Elijah (1 Kg. 17:18), or Elisha (2 Kg. 4:7).

- ❖ In fact, v11 is the only place in the NT where a person is directly addressed as a *man of God*. So Paul is not using it lightly. **He knows (and Timothy knows) that being a 'man of God' means something. It means you're God's man.** It's a possessive phrase. It means Timothy belongs to God. He lives for God. This, of course, is in contrast to the false teachers who are described as a lovers of money. They live for money. They're Money's Man. But as for you, Timothy, you're God's Man.

- ❖ Paul's trying to inspire him. He's placing Timothy in an honored line of succession that stretches back to the mature saints of old. What a privilege to be considered a "man of God" – to be known as "God's man", to be named alongside Moses, David, and Elijah.
 - **That should be the heartbeat of every Christian – a burning desire to be known as God's man or God's woman.** Where you're characterized by a degree of maturity such that everyone can tell who or what you live for – who or what you belong to. Not money or careers's man. Not approval or romance's woman. No, the heart of a mature Christian belongs first and foremost to God. We want to live for him.

- ❖ **So as study today's passage, our goal is to figure out what a mature Christian looks like.** What are the particular characteristics that identify a believer as one who is spiritually mature or at least on the way? **What marks of maturity should I be looking for in my own life?**
 - Be prepared to be uncomfortable. You may come to realize that you have some maturing left to do. But that's okay. That's what the Word of God is supposed to do. It's supposed to convict while, at the same time, hold out promises that inspire and encourage us towards greater maturity in Christ.
- ❖ **So what are the marks of a mature Christian?** In our text, I can see five. Let me put them in a way you can remember. A while back I came across a great outline of this passage by John MacArthur, so I'm taking the liberty to tweak it a bit for our purposes today. **A mature Christian is marked by 1) what you flee from, 2) what you follow after, 3) what you fight for, 4) what you fasten onto, and 5) what you are faithful to.**

A mature Christian is marked by what you flee from.

- ❖ First, a mature Christian is marked by what you flee from. Look at v11 again, "*But as for you, O man of God, flee these things.*" The "*these things*" are referring to what Paul mentioned earlier in vv3-10. He's talking about the marks of the false teachers. He's referring to their conceit, their craving for controversy, their divisiveness, their love of money – "*these things*" that marked them.
 - Paul is warning Timothy to flee from such sins. To flee from any temptation to think or act in like manner. **Now every time that word 'flee' is used in the NT, it's in the context of a fleeing from a perceived danger to your life.** So in Matthew 2:13, Joseph and family *flee* from King Herod who seeks to kill them. In Mark 14:50, the disciples *flee* from Gethsemane in fear for their lives. In Acts 27:30, sailors attempt to *flee* from a sinking ship onto a life raft.
- ❖ **So Paul's command for Timothy to *flee* is a warning to run away from a clearly perceived danger to your life.** Now in a sense, that comes natural to us. It's the fight-or-flight reflex. When certain dangers threaten us, one natural reflex is flight – to flee. No one has to train you or charge you to run when you see the funnel cloud of a tornado coming down from above. It's a natural instinct.
 - **But when it comes to spiritual dangers – when you're dealing with threats to our spiritual lives – fleeing is not the natural instinct.** Instead of running from sin, our reflex is to entertain it. Instead of fleeing from various sins, we have a tendency to tolerate them.
- ❖ Why is that? **Why are we so quick to flee from mortal danger but not spiritual danger?** It's probably because we don't perceive spiritual dangers as being truly dangerous. **There are sins that we just don't see as real threats.** There are obviously sins that we all recognize as dangerous and to be avoided, but there are many that we easily tolerate in our own lives.

- ❖ There's this really good book by Jerry Bridges called “*Respectable Sins*”. He gets right at this issue. **At how there are certain sins that are often treated as acceptable for Christians.** He has chapters on anxiety, discontentment, unthankfulness, pride, selfishness, lack of self-control, impatience and irritability, anger, judgmentalism, envy, and worldliness. We too easily tolerate these things.
 - **But one of the marks of a mature Christian is the ability to see the clear and present danger in every sin – no matter how small or how acceptable it is to those around us – and to have the readiness to flee.**

- ❖ I grew up in the Boy Scouts, and in my scout manual it explained how to tell the difference between a harmless king snake and the deadly coral snake. They were both three-banded snakes made up of red, yellow and black bands, but they differ in the color order. So we were taught a rhyme, “Red on yellow, kill a fellow. Red on black, friend of Jack.”
 - I remember one camping trip, we were hiking along and a bunch of us boys were trying to recall the rhyme. Our Scoutmaster interrupted and said, “Boys, I’ve got an easier rhyme to remember: See a three-banded snake, RUN!”

- ❖ Now there’s wisdom in that. **So also in the Christian life, there are times, when in the face of sin and temptation, the only recourse is to run.** Don’t entertain the sin. Don’t try to analyze it. Don’t test yourself, seeing how close you can get before it bites. No, you don’t mess around with sin. That would be a mark of immaturity.
 - **Mature Christians know when it’s time to run.** They perceive the true danger of sin, and they know their own weaknesses. They’re not under the illusion that they’ve defeated any sin in their life to the point that they’re no longer susceptible to its charm. So when it rears its ugly head, the mature Christian flees.

A mature Christian is marked by what you follow after.

- ❖ Now whenever you flee from one direction, you’re going in another. So after Paul warns Timothy to flee sin, he continues in v11 with a command to “*pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.*” **What this means is that Christian maturity requires more than just avoiding evil but also doing good.**
 - In other words, the mature are known by what they follow after and not just what they flee from. This is our second mark of maturity: A mature Christian is marked by what you follow after.

- ❖ **Just as nature hates a vacuum, the soul, if emptied of some evil, needs to be filled with something else.** And if your soul is not filled with virtue and goodness, then something worse than before might take its place. Jesus warned in **Matthew 12:43-45**, “*43When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. 44Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. 45Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first.*”

- ❖ Likewise, immature Christians try to flee certain evils but fail to follow after goodness. But the mature not only empty their lives of sin but also fill it with righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness.
 - These six virtues in v11 can be broken down into three pairs. **The first pair, righteousness and godliness, describe both the inner heart and outward conduct.** A mature Christian is one who pursues after (and is known for) her righteous motives and godly behavior.

- ❖ **The second pair, faith and love, represent the essential virtues of a mature Christian.** They're usually paired together because mature Christians not only trust God for salvation but also treasure God over all other loves. God's not just the object of their faith but the supreme object of their desires.
 - **The third pair, steadfastness and gentleness, represent the right response to a world hostile to the gospel.** There is this idea of gentleness in the midst of suffering. A mature Christian is one who is marked by the ability to endure the attacks of a hostile culture and still be gentle towards hostile people.

- ❖ So righteousness and godliness, faith and love, steadfastness and gentleness – these are six virtues that a mature believer in Christ will follow after. So ask yourself this question. **Is the sum aggregate of your Christian experience mainly about trying to avoid certain sins?**
 - Are you only known as a Christian by the things you flee from? By what you don't do? **Or are you known as a Christian by what you follow after, by what you passionately pursue?** Are you pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness and gentleness?

A mature Christian is marked by what you fight for.

- ❖ Here is a third mark of maturity: A mature Christian is marked by what you fight for. He not only flees and follows, he fights. Look at v12: "*Fight the good fight of the faith.*" Isn't it interesting that right after telling Timothy to pursue gentleness, Paul tells him to fight? Apparently they're not in contradiction. You can be gentle *and* a fighter.

- ❖ **To understand how that can be, you have to understand that this word for fight doesn't necessary mean doing physical harm to someone or arguing with someone.** The Greek word is *agonizomai*, and that root word *agon* is where we get the English word 'agony' or 'agonize'. It was used in the realm of both combat and athletics. So don't just assume Paul's referring to a battle. He could be referring to the struggle (the exertion) involved in athletic training and competition.
 - **Literally, he's telling Timothy to "agonize the good agony."** But what is he to agonize and struggle for? Look at v12, agonize the good agony *of the faith*. But what does that mean? On one level, it means Timothy is to fight for *the* faith. That is, to fight for the purity and truthfulness of *the* gospel because it was being challenged by the false teachers.

- ❖ **But the good fight of the faith could also be a fight to keep faith, to keep believing.**
Notice how in v10, Paul warned that some, eager for money, have “*wandered away from the faith.*” The false teachers stopped believing the gospel. So the fight is to do the exact opposite. The fight is to persevere in faith in the gospel.
 - ❖ **The immature Christian is the one who assumes that the gospel is a message you only need to hear and put your faith in once at the beginning of the journey.** The good news centered on the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the sufficiency of Christ and the cross, and the power of salvation by grace through faith – the immature consider that message the ABCs of the Christian faith. It’s elementary, for seekers, for new Christians. Once you make that decision to trust in it, you can move on to meatier topics and lessons.
 - **But the mature in Christ recognize that the gospel is not the ABCs of the Christian faith but (as Tim Keller puts it) the A to Z of the faith.** It’s a message you never grow too old or too mature for. You need the gospel preached to you week in and week out because your sinful flesh, this fallen world, and your enemy the devil will work together to make you forget the realities of the gospel, to create unbelief in your heart, and cause you to question your salvation and doubt the goodness of God.
 - ❖ Picture yourself on a river in a rowboat. You have two options. You can go upstream or down. To go upstream, you’ll have to fight against the current and row hard. But if you want to go downstream, you can just take your hands off the oars and let the current take you.
 - That option sounds appealing, but there is something you need to know about this river. This river flows downstream towards a mighty waterfall. And at the bottom of this waterfall are jagged rocks that will destroy you.
 - ❖ So it is with the Christian life, there is no standing still. **The option is not between fighting the good fight or standing still.** No, you’re either fighting against the currents of unbelief in this world (and in your heart) or you’re being carried away by them, heading towards sure destruction. You go one way or the other.
 - That’s why the mature in Christ row hard. **That’s why they fight and struggle and agonize against the currents of unbelief.** That’s why they seek to sit under the preaching of the gospel every Lord’s Day. That’s why they preach the gospel to themselves every day as they spend time with God and his Word. They fight the good fight of the faith because they know the alternative is to risk a shipwreck of faith.
- A mature Christian is marked by what you fasten onto.**
- ❖ Now this relates to the fourth mark: A mature Christian is marked by what you fasten onto. Look back at the second half of v12. It says, “*Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.*”
 - Here Paul is referring to the public confession of faith that Timothy made, most likely the one at his baptism, which in the early church followed soon after your conversion. Now notice how Paul mentions Timothy’s calling. He’s not referring to a call to ministry, to be the pastor of Ephesus, but a call to salvation, to eternal life.

- ❖ When the gospel was preached to him at a young age, the Lord issued an inward, regenerating, faith-giving, blindness-removing, divine call into Timothy's heart, which resulted in his conversion. He believed in Christ and received eternal life. **And now Paul is telling him to take hold of that eternal life to which he was called.**
 - So think about it. What's going to motivate Timothy (and motivate us) to keep fighting the good fight of the faith is not the fear of failure. We're not suppose to be motivated by the fear of losing eternal life. We're suppose to motivated by the reality of God's call in our lives. **If you've been called by God to eternal life, you have every motivation to take hold of it.**
 - It's no different than what Paul taught in **Philippians 3:12-14** where he says, *"I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."*

- ❖ **So Paul is telling us Christians to take hold of something we already have in Christ.** As John Stott puts it, *"It's possible to possess something without embracing it and enjoying it."* He's saying you could possess eternal life without embracing it, without taking hold of it as truly yours.
 - **Every true Christian has eternal life in their grips, but only the mature are gripped by it.** Only the mature have fastened onto the future reality of eternal life – so tight that it bleeds into their present experience. Eternal life is making a difference in their lives right now.

- ❖ **Christian, is the reality that you've been called to enjoy eternal life with God in Christ making a difference in your life right now?** Is it affecting your priorities, affecting how you spend your money, how you treat others, how you go about your work or your studies, how you raise your children or treat your spouse? Maybe, by the grace of God, you have eternal life in your grips but are you gripped by it? That's how you know if you're mature.

- A mature Christian is marked by what you're faithful to.**
- ❖ There is one more mark to consider: A mature Christian is marked by what you're faithful to. I see this in vv13-14. *"¹³I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, ¹⁴to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will display at the proper time."* **So notice how a mature Christian is marked by faithfulness to "keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach".**

- ❖ Now what does that mean? **What is 'the commandment' that Timothy is supposed to keep?** Specifically it's referring to the commands to flee, follow, fight and fasten that we've considered but now taken as a whole. **But more generally, we can read the commandment as shorthand for Timothy's life and calling.** The commandment is the sum of everything he's commanded to do and be as a Christian and especially as pastor of this church.

- ❖ This charge to keep his life and calling unstained and free from reproach is simply a restatement of what Paul already said in chapter **4:16**, “*Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching.*”
 - That’s what mature Christians do. They keep a close watch on their life and doctrine. They live their lives and carry out their callings with such honor and integrity that they adorn the gospel. They make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.

Bad News / Good News

- ❖ So let’s summarize what we’ve seen so far. The marks of a mature Christian are as follows: 1) They **flee** from all known sin in their lives, 2) They **follow** after the character of Christ till it’s reflected in their own, 3) They **fight** the good fight to persevere in faith, 4) They **fasten** onto eternal life until it bleeds into their present experience, and 5) They are **faithful** to keep the first four commands and to keep their lives and callings free from any stain or reproach.
- ❖ Now some of you might be feeling pretty low right now. You’re realizing how much more you have to grow in maturity. **I have bad news to tell you as well as some good news.** Let’s start with the bad.
 - The bad news is that this charge to be a mature man or woman of God – this charge to keep your life and calling free of stain or reproach – **Paul is giving this charge in the presence of God.** Look at v15. One day all of us will stand before, “*the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords.*” And we’ll give an account of how we kept the commandment, the charge.
- ❖ **On that day, the light of his perfect holiness will shine on us like a spotlight.** And all the times we failed to flee sin OR fell short of following after righteousness OR surrendered in the fight of faith OR loosened our grip on eternal life – **every shortfall, every stain, every blemish in our lives will be revealed on that day.**
 - It’s no wonder Paul says in v16 that God “*dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.*” We’re just too ashamed to approach God, too scared to find out what his holiness might reveal. But even if we wanted to approach, we can’t. We can’t even look at him. **No one has ever gazed directly at the unshielded glory of his holiness and survived.**
 - It would be like looking directly into the sun. But the holiness of God burns a billion times brighter and hotter than the sun. Sinners like us can no further approach God than a snowman can approach the sun.
- ❖ This is the bad news. Considering the marks of maturity makes me feel bad enough. Now you’re saying that I’m accountable before God to perfectly exhibit these marks in my life unstained or free from reproach? Now I’m devastated. **It’s devastating to think about how much reproach still stains us and how unapproachable God is.**

- ❖ Like I said, this is bad news. But now you're ready for the good. **The good news is that even though God dwells in unapproachable light, he has made a way for sinners like us to still approach.** He did it by sending his beloved Son. Paul recognizes this, and that's why in v13 he says I'm giving you this charge, "*in the presence of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession.*"
 - If you recall, at his trial, Pilate asked if he was the King of the Jews, and Jesus made the good confession, which sealed his fate. It sent him to the cross. But Jesus was not the tragic victim of Roman injustice. **No, he laid down his life willingly, knowing that through the cross he would reconcile sinners to God.** Through his flesh, he would pave a new and living way to approach the unapproachable.

- ❖ Friends, you need to *hear this and believe this* because **without the confidence to approach God that's found in Christ, your efforts to grow in maturity will be driven predominantly by fear** – fear of rejection, fear of failure, fear of punishment. But that's not Christianity. Christianity is not driven by fear but love. **It's our love for God, our gratitude for Jesus, and our faith in his promises that motivate us to become mature men and women of God.**

- ❖ Church, let me leave you with an encouraging word that you'll find in v14. Notice how this charge to keep the commandment is our responsibility "*until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which [God] will display at the proper time.*"
 - I realize that **fleeing** and **following** and **fighting** and **fastening** and trying to be **faithful** is hard work. But one day it will be finished. We only need to agonize until the appearing of our Lord Jesus.

- ❖ When Christ returns, all sin and temptation will be eradicated. So there will be **no more fleeing**. When Christ returns, we will be fully mature, there will be **no more following** after once we perfectly reflect the character of Christ.
 - When Christ returns, there will be **no more fighting** to keep faith because faith will be no more. We will see face to face. You can put down your sword. The fight is over.
 - When Christ returns, there will be **no more fastening** because we will have finally taken hold of the prize of eternal life. And lastly, when Christ returns, after all our striving to be **faithful**, we'll finally hear those sweet words, "*Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master!*" Amen.