

1 Timothy 6:11-12

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[0 : 0 0] When you were a child, or those of you who are children, don't need to remember this. Do you remember, or is it the case if you are a child, that you had an aunt or an uncle or a relative or a family friend who could be relied upon to give really good presents? I think every child should have such a relative that you can be sure that come birthday, come Christmas, or maybe even on other occasions, there's going to be a seriously good present coming your way. In fact, I don't think just kids should have such a relative. I think all of us should have one of those relatives or family friends, somebody who's really good at giving great gifts. This morning, as we considered the passage before us, we discovered or rediscovered, we're reminded that God is a really great gift giver, that Jesus is really good at giving gifts.

Let's just remind ourselves of the words that we were thinking about this morning, the words of Jesus as He prays to His Father, Father, the time has come. Glorify Your Son that Your Son may glorify You.

For You granted Him authority over all people, that He might give eternal life to all those You have given Him. Now this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God in Jesus Christ, whom You have sent. Eternal life is a gift that we receive, the gift of knowing God in and through Jesus, the gift of a relationship with God, and the life that accompanies and evidences such a relationship. So if eternal life is a gift, as Jesus very clearly states, are we altogether passive? In the matter. He gives us eternal life. He gives us eternal life. And we simply receive. Of course, it's important to receive, as we were thinking about this evening. But nonetheless, you might say, well, that's not very difficult. That doesn't involve much on our part. We passively receive the gift that God gives us. Now this morning, very fleetingly, we did recognize that in our response to this gift of eternal life that is offered to us, we do have a responsibility in that it's twofold. We have to receive the gift. And also, we mentioned without developing at all, the need to cultivate that gift. And this evening, I want to consider a text where Paul uses much more intense and urgent language than cultivate, but nonetheless leads on from that recognition that there is a responsibility on our part in regard to this gift that we receive, this gift of eternal life.

The language that Paul uses, and we've read the passage in 1 Timothy in chapter 6, and we can find it there in verses 11 and 12. The language that Paul uses is the language of taking hold, taking hold of eternal life. Let's just read again these two verses in 1 Timothy chapter 6.

[3 : 3 5] But you, man of God, flee from all this and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness, fight the good fight of the faith, take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. This charge is addressed to Timothy, who is described by Paul in these very verses as a man of God. And so, as a man of God, we can very confidently assert that he was a man in possession of eternal life. He was a Christian. He was a believer in Jesus Christ. He had received the gift of eternal life. He was in possession of eternal life as defined by Jesus, to know God and to know Jesus Christ. And yet, Paul challenges him to take hold of eternal life. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called. And so, as Timothy, as a Christian man, was challenged to take hold of eternal life, we too, if you are a man of God, if you are a woman of

God, if you are a child of God, if you are a Christian this evening, then this challenge is also directed to you. Take hold of the eternal life that you were called to. I wonder if that's something we, just for a moment, want to not only say, well, yes, that's okay, but very consciously accept as a challenge that comes to us. We're going to be thinking about what it means, but there'll be little purpose in thinking in great detail, or even in some detail, what it means if we haven't, in our own minds, accepted that, yes, this is a challenge for me. I'm a Christian, and so as a Christian, I take the challenge. I accept that this is directed to me, and I want to know what is involved in order that I

might respond to it. So, just for a moment, in your own mind, accept that this is a challenge directed to you, this challenge to take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.

Now, having done that, of course, the next task is to establish what does that involve? How do I do that? Even if we accept that, yes, this is something I must do, it's clearly something that Paul directs to Timothy as a believer, and I think it's clear that this isn't a challenge that was unique to Timothy. It's a challenge that we can rightly and legitimately extend to believers through the ages and to ourselves this evening. Fine. So, what does that involve? How do I do that? How do I take hold of the eternal life to which I have been called? What does that mean? Well, one way in which we can get to grips with what Paul is saying is by noticing how he presents Timothy's experience of eternal life as involving a past, a present, and a future aspect or dimension. And we're just going to think of how

Paul in these verses recognizes that Timothy's experience of eternal life has these dimensions in time, a past, a present, and a future. We'll begin with the past. We'll actually then head to the future before grounding ourselves back in the present. But we'll begin with the past. Well, notice the language that Paul uses. Timothy is to take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.

Paul encourages Timothy to remember, to look back and to remember God's dealings with him in the past, and also to remember his own response of public confession. God called Timothy. He called him to a life in relationship with and in the service of God. Jesus, exercising the authority granted him by the Father, gifted Timothy eternal life. Timothy, by faith, received that gift, and very possibly, though we can't know for sure, at his baptism, he made public confession of his faith in Jesus.

[8 : 30] Certainly there in verse 12, there is a reference to a specific moment when he made his good confession in the presence of many witnesses. Something public, something memorable, and though we can't know for sure, it seems reasonable to suppose that it could have been on the occasion of his baptism. And all of this is in the past. All of this is, if you wish, a done deal. In the words of Paul in the same letter, Timothy was of those who had believed on Jesus and received eternal life. Notice the language of Paul in the first chapter of 1 Timothy and in verse 16.

We'll read the verse. But for that very reason I was shown mercy, so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience, and then notice especially what he goes on to say, as an example for those who would believe on him, that is, those who would believe on Jesus and receive eternal life. This was true of Timothy. Timothy had in the past, in his own life experience, had believed on Jesus and had in the past received the gift of eternal life.

So, there is this past, and certainly continuing, but this past aspect to Timothy's experience of eternal life that Paul very explicitly makes reference to in this charge that he makes, and specifically in the context of this charge to take hold of eternal life.

Before we move on, it would be remiss of me not to pose the question, what about you? Strange though it may sound, and we will explain this a little more in a moment, you can't even attempt to take hold of eternal life if you have not yet received eternal life.

Now, that sounds like a bit of a conundrum, doesn't it? How can you say that? But that is the implication. You can't take hold of eternal life, however we understand that, and in a moment we're going to suggest how we should understand it, but you can't even think about doing that if you are not as yet in possession of eternal life. Timothy had received the gift of eternal life, and yet having received it, he is urged by Paul to take hold of it. Have you received the gift of eternal life, a gift that is received by faith in Jesus, by putting your trust in Jesus as your own Lord and Savior? So, there is this past aspect, but there is also a present and a future aspect to Timothy's experience of eternal life. And in actual fact, both aspects or dimensions are implied, or at least contemplated, in the language of to take hold of. And we're going to look first at the future aspect, and then we'll return to the present. First of all, the future aspect. The language of verse 12, and we'll just read it again so it's very, very much in our minds and very familiar.

[12 : 07] Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. The language of this verse is the language of the Colosseum or the Stadium. The imagery of the first expression very clearly, the image of fighting the good fight, is athletic imagery, possibly military, but more likely to be a reference to the athletic arena. And Timothy has been charged, he's been exhorted by Paul to fight the good fight. And that is something, very evidently, that he must do in the here and now.

It's something he must do now. Fight the good fight. Carry on fighting. Never give up fighting. Fight the good fight. Fight the good fight of the faith. But as he does so, as he fights the good fight, Paul says that he should have his eyes fixed on the prize that he will, in due course, take hold of. And that prize is conceived of as eternal life.

That would seem to be the implication of what Paul is saying. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life. Fight. It's tough. It's difficult. And, you know, there will be many obstacles in the way. But as you do so, keep your eye on the prize. Keep your eye on the prize of that which you will take hold of in the future. As you will take hold of this gift of eternal life that is yours.

Now, this imagery that Paul uses of the athlete running towards the finishing line, of persevering to the end, is of course very familiar and recurring. We just mention or take note of a couple of occasions when Paul uses this same kind of imagery. In 1 Corinthians 9 and verse 24, we'll just read that verse, but then we'll return to the passage that we read earlier on in the service in Philippians and just spend a little bit more time there. But 1 Corinthians 9 and in verse 24, Paul addressing the believers in Corinth, do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize?

Run in such a way as to get the prize. So again, here Paul says, as you run and as you're tired and as you're exhausted and as you're hitting the wall or whatever runners do in these long races or marathons, keep your eye on the prize. And that will help you. That will help you to carry on when the going gets tough. But then also in Philippians, and particularly I want to notice the language that Paul uses in Philippians. In Philippians chapter 3, we read these verses at the beginning of the service. But if we just notice here or read again three verses from verse 12, Paul says, or expresses himself in this way, not that I have already obtained all this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead,

[15 : 44] I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. Paul here makes reference to this prize that we're suggesting he is encouraging Timothy to have in mind as he fights the good fight. Here he explicitly speaks of this prize. Then in verse 14 and verse 12, he speaks of the need to take hold of this prize. And on a previous occasion not that long ago, we pondered on or we asked the question, well, what is this prize? And for those of you who recall, the conclusion we came to was the words that we have in verse 10, I want to know Christ. When you follow the order or the logic of everything that Paul is saying, and as you work backwards really on this occasion, you come to that conclusion that this prize that he is seeking to take hold of is to know Christ.

Well, that immediately begs the question, if indeed that is true, I'm contending that it is, though I'm not going to justify it this evening. But if it is true, it does rather beg the question, but doesn't Paul know Christ already? Isn't that a strange thing that this would be the prize that he would seek to lay hold of and that he would run the race in order to receive this prize and lay hold of this prize to know Christ if he already knows Christ? Well, yes, of course, Paul did already know Christ. But Paul's great desire is to know him more, to know him more intimately, more richly, more deeply. And so, though he enjoys communion with Christ in the here and now as he looks into the future and especially as he looks into eternity, his great desire, that which drives him forward, that which keeps him going in the difficulties and in the trials and the struggles, is the prospect of knowing Christ more deeply and more richly than he does presently.

So, eternal life in all its fullness and richness and intimacy and excitement is, in one sense, a future prize that Timothy is to be eager to take hold of, as Paul was in the manner he expresses himself there in Philippians. Indeed, keeping his eye fixed on the prize will help him in the here and now as he fights the good fight. So, I think it is legitimate to recognize that in these words, in the language used here by Paul in 1 Timothy 6, when he speaks of taking hold of the eternal life, especially as he uses that language in the context of fighting the good fight and of setting before Timothy this prize that is before him a future prize, that there is this future aspect. There is a past aspect. Timothy had received the gift of eternal life when by faith he had put his trust in Jesus, explicit reference made to that by Paul.

But there is also this future aspect that as he fights the good fight today, he does so with his eyes face fixed on what is fixed on what is before and what is yet to come and the prospect of taking hold of eternal life.

So, the past and the future. But there is also, I think, in these words of Paul, a present aspect of the eternal life that he is in the world. The very important thing that he is in the world of the eternal life. The very word that Paul uses is a very intense word to seize, to grasp, to take hold of.

[19 : 45] And the imperative form that he employs. So, the word that he uses and the imperative form that he employs implies, implies, you might even say requires, also a call to present action. So, there is that forward look. That forward look that would inspire him and keep him going in the difficult times, looking forward to the time when he would depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. There is that forward look. But the language he uses here cannot be, I don't think, exhausted in only a forward aspect, but requires a present aspect also. Now, to claim that there is both a future and a present sense in Paul's charge to take hold of eternal life is not to have your cake and eat it, and it's certainly not contradictory. Rather, it is a reflection of the ever-present tension between the already and the not yet in the believer's experience of salvation, in the believer's experience of eternal life, in the believer's experience of our relationship with God in Christ. There is an already and there is a not yet in our experience, in our enjoyment of eternal life that is an already. And praise God for that.

It is true today, now, that we are in possession of eternal life. We have been given eternal life. That's a done deal. It's already so. It is a present experience.

It is a present experience. But in our experience and enjoyment of eternal life, there is also the realm of the not yet. There is that which we as yet have not enjoyed, and that is a future prospect for us. And we praise God for that also, as we contemplate how much more there is for us. What we have now is wonderful and overabundant, but there is so much more for us yet to enjoy in this whole realm of eternal life. And so, for Paul, in the language he uses to both have Timothy look forward into the future to the laying hold of eternal life, and at the same time to charge him and to challenge him that there is a responsibility in the present to lay hold of eternal life that the Bible presents.

But having recognized, or certainly making the claim or contending, that this charge of Paul to Timothy to take hold of eternal life has a present aspect, a very practical question emerges. And that is, what does that involve? How do you now, in the present, take hold of eternal life? What do you need to do? What does that look like? What does it involve? I don't think we'll go very far wrong in suggesting that the three exhortations that lead into the charge to take hold of eternal life here in the passage serve as a pretty good summary of what is involved in our present duty and privilege of taking hold of eternal life.

And what are the three exhortations that lead us in to this charge of Paul to Timothy, take hold of the eternal life to which you were called. What are they? Well, we can read again verses in 11 and 12, and as we read them now, identify and notice the three prior exhortations, three verbs really, that lead into this fourth charge to take hold of eternal life. And what I'm suggesting is that these three prior ones together, as we respond to them and as we engage in them, what we're effectively doing is taking hold of eternal life.

[24 : 10] Well, what are they? But you, man of God, flee from all this. It's one of the things that Timothy is to do and that we are to do. We are to flee. We'll notice in a moment, very fleetingly, what we are to flee from. Flee from all this. But then immediately he goes on, and pursue. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. So we are to flee. We are to pursue. And then, of course, the words that begin, verse 12, fight the good fight of the faith. I think these three elements combined as we are careful to take on board the challenge and to do that which we are being called to do together, it seems to me form a pretty good summary of what is involved in taking hold of eternal life. We are to flee. Flee from all this is the language there in verse 11, obviously making a reference to what has already been said. To lay hold of eternal life, a life that involves a growing and a deepening relationship with God involves fleeing from all that which God hates. The closer to God we are, the more we wish to flee from all that is displeasing to God. What does all this comprise of? Well, some examples are given in the preceding verses. Paul speaks of false doctrines that Timothy is to flee from.

He speaks of quarrels and strife among the brethren. He says, you must flee from these things. He speaks of the love of money and all the evil that comes from a love of money and a life where we enjoy more, to use the words of the psalmist, enjoy more counting our gold than pondering on God's Word. So, these are some examples.

Of course, there could be many more that Paul could have used, but they illustrate that there is this whole realm of activity and of priorities and of sinful manners of thinking and of behaving that we are to flee from.

Laying hold of, taking hold of eternal life involves this aspect of fleeing from sin. But also, it involves pursuing. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. These are what we might call gospel virtues. They are godlike traits. Our desire is to be like God and we become like God as we are transformed into the image of His Son. And in this mission, we must actively and decidedly pursue gospel virtue. The work of God in us, transforming us into the image of His Son, is a work that is guaranteed. He will bring it to its conclusion. But it is a work in which we very much are to participate. And we participate in this way, pursuing these gospel virtues, if we wish to call them or describe them in that way. We won't think about each of them in turn. And then, thirdly, the third charge that leads on to the words of Paul, take hold of eternal life. The charge to fight the good fight of the faith.

This is a general charge to live the Christian life in a manner worthy of our calling and identity as sons of God. And the language clearly implies great effort and struggle and commitment and focus and discipline.

[28 : 02] Fight the good fight of the faith. It's difficult, but it is a good fight. It's a good fight well worth fighting. And so, as we try and, in a practical sense, try and understand, well, okay, there is this charge that's directed to me as a Christian to take hold of eternal life in the present. Well, what am I to do? Well, you are to flee from sin. You are to pursue these gospel virtues. You are to fight the good fight of the faith. Taking hold of eternal life has this present aspect.

Fleeing from sin, pursuing Christ's likeness, fighting the good fight. Will you, Christian friend, will you take hold of eternal life? By the grace of God, it is a gift that you have been given and have received. But will you respond to this challenge that Paul brings to you, that God brings to you through Paul in this letter addressed to Timothy? Will you take hold of eternal life in this week that's begun? We've begun a new week. Tomorrow's Monday, and there's work, and there's study, and there's all kinds of duties and concerns, no doubt, that you have in mind as you look at the week ahead.

But I would encourage you, I would challenge you to, in a very practical way, to consider how in this week you can flee from sin. Consider those sins that you have a particular need to flee from, and we're all different. And this isn't something where we're going to be sharing with others these matters. In many ways, it's a very personal matter. What sin, what particular sin ought you to flee from this week? When we think of these gospel virtues, and of course, they are all important, but which of them is one that, with particular concern and urgency will you pursue in this week that has begun? And will you, in this week, fight the good fight of the faith, giving it the effort and the discipline and the commitment, the focus that is necessary in order to do so? Will God help us so to do? Let us pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.