“***The Good Fight***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, September 29, 2019

**Amos 6:1, 4–7**

1Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria. . .

4 Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; 5 who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; 6 who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! 7 Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

**1 Timothy 2:3–4; 6:6–12**

3God our Savior 4desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. . . .

6Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; 7 We brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; 8but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. 9But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. . . . 12Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called.

Two popular sayings come from this First Timothy passage, both of which get shortened, and possibly distorted, in the popular versions. You’ve heard “fight the good fight,” but the Bible actually says “fight the good fight of the faith” (1 Tim 6:12). That saying can either be distorted, or its spiritual focus be preserved, depending on how one uses it.

The other passage very definitely gets distorted, but in an interesting way. The popular saying is “money is the root of all evil.” But the passage actually says “the love of money as a root of all kinds of evil” (6:10), quite a different saying. There are other things besides money that lead to evil. There is envy, the desire for fame and adulation, lust—whether sexual lust or the lust for power—frequent causes of evildoing. But money, no doubt, is enticing, and many are enamored of the freedom and the power that they think it brings, but they fail to notice how it enslaves them. And you don’t have to be rich to be seduced by wealth. The passage says “those who *want* to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by . . . desires” (6:9). It’s the *wanting*—the desire itself that tempts and traps people. Desire for money can make people insecure, frantic, weak, and then they go on to become dishonest. By the time they reach that state, they have already abandoned every moral principle they used to have. They think of morals as childish; they say “I’m no boy scout.”

Such remarks show an ugly and degraded cynicism. People should strive for moral goodness throughout their lives. If you are not seeking moral goodness, justice, and fairness, then you are not fighting the good fight of faith. Are you at ease in Zion? Are you lounging on your couch, eating lambs and calves, drinking wine from a bowl (Amos 6:4–5)? Now, I don’t eat lambs or calves, but I certainly *do* lounge on my couch, and even drink wine. The prophet Amos might turn his gaze upon *me*. Hopefully he would know about when and where in my life I *do* make a moral effort. I *do* care about the ruin of Joseph, or the comparable thing in *our* day and *our* culture.

The prophet Amos is deeply concerned with the injustice and frivolity of oppressive wealth. He is not only worried for the poor, who are being cheated, but also on behalf of the wealthy, for their hardened hearts. Amos is very good at naming and attacking the problem, not so good at understanding or curing the malady. Jesus is the one who’s good at that. He provides the spiritual truth that can lead to self-understanding, changed lives, and new vigor. People’s ethics grow out of their theology and character. As Jesus said, “every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matt 7:17). Some people are a sick tree; they don’t know that they are loved by God. It is easy to be cruel and heartless when you have a cold and callous concept of the universe, and don’t know about the love of God. So it is crucial to know yourselfto be a child of God, to have that foundation for character and for growth. Then you can “make the tree good” (Matt 12:33), as Jesus says: can actually *be* good. You can change. We are to be imitators of God in our lives: to embody the highest spiritual values in our relationships and choices. And the Bible makes clear that, besides morality, there is *mercy*, and there is understanding, and we are going to get more of those from Jesus than from Amos.

How about the author of First Timothy? What does he say? “Harmful desires plunge people into ruin and destruction. . . . In their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains” (1 Tim 6:9–10). It’s good criticism, with a highly moralistic tone. In fact, he sounds like a bossy and commanding priest. But a pushy priest cannot really lead you into a transformed life. He might browbeat you into feeling guilty, and into conforming to his instructions for a while, but if you are going to have *lasting* change you need *inward* renewal that is your own, that *you* have chosen. And who is going to inspire that? Probably a loving and respectful leader rather than a bossy one.

And so, the real inspiration toward moral change comes from knowing that God is good, and that you are loved. And I see that in our last line from First Timothy: “take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called” (6:12). That’s encouraging. But there’s more of it in the gospels. Just in the Gospel of John we read “love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15:12), and “the Father himself loves you” (John 16:27). Loving attention is the best kind of evangelism, and of leadership, too. Jesus said “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:43). *True* leadership is servant-leadership that inspires others to “make the tree good.” When *that’s* what you desire, then desire no longer works against you. If your desire is spiritual, then desire becomes your ally.