

A Matter Of Life And Death by Jeff Strite

1 Timothy 1:3-1:19

How many of you know the meaning of these letters used to describe a sporting event: MMA? (Mix Martial Arts).

It's kind of like boxing where the contestants not only hit each other with their fists, but also with their feet and knees and elbows. It's also called "Cage fighting" because the contenders are literally inside a cage. They can't fall over the edge of the mat like in standard boxing and wrestling.

Another definition of this type of contest is that it is "Unarmed Combat" because when a blow is struck enthusiasts say "it may reasonably be expected to inflict injury."

As you can imagine, Cage fighting is a particularly rough sport. Contestants often are knocked out, tear ligaments, break bones, and even - in very rare cases - die. They punch, kick and beat on each other as they fight to the finish.

Top champions may earn millions, lower level pros may only earn a few hundred dollars per fight, and amateurs (the majority of those who participate in this grueling challenge) earn nothing. And yet 100s of young men and women engage in this kind of contest in order to prove their skills in the ring.

And they aren't the first to engage in this kind of Sport.

One source I read said that "The art of boxing, whereby two men enter a contest to see who can withstand the most punches from the other, dates back at least as far as the earliest civilisations and is probably one of the oldest sports of its kind in the history of fighting."

By the day of Paul and Timothy, such fighting contests would have made our present day cage fighting contests seem tame by comparison. They wrapped the hands of the fighters in leather straps, and THEN had metal inserted into them.

You might ask why would they do this? Well, this kind of leather wrapping with the metal insert was called the "caestus" and was more like a knife than a boxing glove it could actually stab and rupture the other fighter.

"Unsurprisingly, boxing matches in Rome often ended in the death of the loser."

(<http://www.historyoffighting.com/boxing-in-the-ancient-world.php>)

It's against that backdrop that Paul writes these words to Timothy: "Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience." I Timothy 1:18-19a

And later in this letter Paul repeats himself: "Fight the good fight of the faith" I Timothy 6:12a

And in his last letter to Timothy, Paul says:

"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." II Timothy

4:6

Now, knowing how brutal such a fight could be, why would Paul use this kind of language? Why use a bloody contest that often ended in death to describe Timothy's task?

(Pause)

Now I have to admit, this cage fighting theme was not my idea. One of the other preachers in our group came up with it. For the longest time I struggled with using this kind of illustration as part of my sermon and I almost just dropped the idea and started looking for some other way to frame this sermon.

But then I began to realize this was exactly the image Paul was using... on purpose.

Allow me to repeat the phrase I found on that website about boxing in Rome:

"Unsurprisingly, boxing matches in Rome often ended in the death of the loser."

Boxing matches in the days of Paul and Timothy were matters of "life and death."

When Paul was writing to Timothy he was essentially telling him:

"What you are doing IS a matter of life and death. Lives are hanging in the balance.

Timothy, if you don't do your job, people are going to die and go to hell.

So fight!

Fight the good fight!

You stand your ground!

You do everything in your power to win the day!

Because if you don't – people will lose their souls."

As if to drive that home, Paul tells Timothy: "Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith." 1Timothy 1:19

People had shipwrecked their faith and were going to hell because they decided their faith wasn't a matter of life and death to them.

ILLUS: In our brotherhood, if you lose your job in one congregation you don't get assigned to another. Instead you go – hat in hand – from church to church and try to impress them with the fact that you are worth hiring.

That was the experience I had had before I was hired here. I was fired from my last church. In fact, I was fired from the last two churches I served. They were hard churches. And after the last church fired me I decided if I couldn't find a better church to serve than the first two had been – I was going to go sell insurance. I wasn't in the mood to impress anyone to hire me. I intended to let the churches know who I was and what I stood for, and if they didn't like that... they didn't have to bother with me.

Well, in the process of my job search, someone told me of a congregation over in Illinois that was looking for a preacher. They'd had 15 different preachers apply for the job, but for some reason nothing worked out and the pulpit was still open. At the interview I found out "why" none of the other preachers hired on.

It started out like any normal interview, but eventually people began to ask questions about things that mattered to them.

One man asked me if I preached sermons about veterans on Veterans Day. I said "No, I've never done that. I believe veterans should be recognized and honored on special days (we do that here), but I believed a preacher shouldn't get sidetracked by preaching on "special holidays". I was more than willing to use illustrations about veterans and their sacrifice, but I wouldn't be preaching special sermons specifically for special occasions. I was called to preach about Christ crucified and risen from the dead.

He didn't like that answer.

Then another man asked if I opposed the Masonic Lodge. I answered that my daddy had been a Mason and I had been in DeMolay (kind of like a junior Mason) and I personally didn't have a problem with the group. But the only people that had ever given me trouble in the previous 2 churches had been... Masons.

The Masons I'd encountered at the previous congregations had often regarded their lodge as more important than church. When it came to a choice between protecting a fellow lodge member or obeying Christ, they always seemed to choose the lodge member. I explained that I had nothing against the Masonic Lodge per se. But if any church member who held their membership in the lodge as more important than their commitment to Christ... they were going to have a problem with me.

And he didn't like that answer.

And things went pretty much downhill from there.

By the time the interview was over... they were yelling at me.

A lot.

You know what the problem was at that church?

Christianity wasn't a matter of life or death for them. They were playing at church. Church was a social gathering for them. It didn't matter if people went to hell as long the preacher took care to embrace and feed their own personal sacred cow. And these folks had a whole barn yard full of sacred cows.

People could go to hell... and they just couldn't care less.

Now the question is, how would you and I know we've fallen into that trap? How would we know whether we'd begun to view the church as social organization? How would we know if we'd forgotten how critical church is to us?

It's possible, you know. It's possible to fall into that mindset without even realizing you've done so. Notice, Paul is warning Timothy not to let that happen to him.

Now, here's the deal: We have an enemy.

You did know that didn't you?

We have an enemy and his objective is to destroy us. He will do whatever he has to do to bring us to our knees. And so everything we do here is critical. Everything we teach and preach here is vital to our survival. Everything we do and say and think outside these walls has a powerful effect on whether Satan can infiltrate and damage our church family here.

If a church forgets that Satan desires to destroy them, they tend to play at church. And, in the process, they do whatever is necessary to avoid dealing with members who do or teach things they shouldn't do or say.

Here in his letter to Timothy, Paul tells him he can't do that. He can't avoid confronting people who do and teach things they shouldn't. And in this chapter Paul tells Timothy 3 things he needs to know about church discipline:

The first thing he tells Timothy is this: DO IT.

"...command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer" I Timothy 1:3

DO IT!

Don't back off.

Don't worry about hurting someone's feelings.

Do what has to be done ... because this is a matter of life and death.

If you don't do your job – people will go to hell.

The 2nd thing Paul tells Timothy is to realize that: "The aim of our charge IS LOVE that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." 1 Timothy 1:5

Paul is saying: "When you discipline people, Timothy, do it in love. Your goal is to talk them out of what they're doing.

Now there are churches that are more than happy to engage in church discipline with the intention of driving out of the church any form of impurity. But they don't show love. They run people out... and never want to let them back in.

To those folks Paul writes this 3rd principle he shared with Timothy:

"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners— of whom I am the worst." 1 Timothy 1:15

There's an old saying – there - but for the grace of God - go I.

Self-righteous and judgmental Christians and Churches are NOT acceptable to God, because we're all sinners! You are, I am, the Elders and Deacons and Sunday School teachers. We've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We don't discipline from a position of superior righteousness because we don't have that. But we still must confront false teachers and people who do immoral things in the church.

Notice what Paul said: "Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme." I Timothy 1:19b-20

What does it mean – "I handed them over to Satan...?"

It means Paul kicked these guys out of the church.

Why? Because he wanted to teach them not to blaspheme.

In his instructions Paul is telling – if you love people you will confront them when they do wrong. A loving Christians doesn't want someone else to go to hell. And so they will fight the good fight and do what's necessary to win them.

ILLUS: One of the things I admire about our leadership here is the fact that – when people are in sin – they try very hard to confront them and get them to change. On more than one occasion we've taken people aside and said: "Look, what you're doing is wrong. You can't continue to do that here. But we don't want to lose you. We'll work with you, get you counseling whatever you need. But you MUST make a decision because we can't allow you to remain here as long as you engage in this practice."

Now, there are people who basically say: "That's not my job. That's what we hired Jeff to do.

Paul was writing to Timothy... Timothy's the preacher... he and the Elders had that responsibility.

That's their job not mine. I'll just sit back and be quiet."

Now – that seems to make sense. But here's the problem with that.

ILLUS: I remember talking with a woman on the internet some time back. She said that there was a man who playing an instrument in her church's worship band who was living with his girlfriend. I asked her if she had talked to her church's leadership about that and her answer was:

"I don't think it's my place to do that."

I said: "How are they going to deal with this if they don't know what's going on?"

And she replied: "I just don't feel like doing it."

If we know that there is sin in the church and we don't talk that person, or the Eldership about it a person who's doing something they shouldn't... God's not going to be very happy about that.

In Ezekiel 33 God tells Ezekiel (and by extension – us) that He's put US as watchmen on a wall. Our job is to watch for dangers to His church. If we see danger coming and warn our people that's it's coming... and they don't listen to us... the blame is all theirs.

But if we see danger coming and DON'T warn people – God says: "I will hold the watchman accountable for their blood." Ezekiel 33:6b HCSB

So, God takes this seriously.

But why would God hold us accountable for the punishment of others?

Because God wants us to keep each other out of trouble.

Paul writes the Galatian church:

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." Galatians 6:1

Let me repeat what I've said before... this is a life or death issue.

People caught in sin need help!!! Otherwise... they're going to hell. And YOU might be the only one who can stand in their way.

ILLUS: An atheist once told William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, "If I believed what you Christians say you believe about a coming judgment and that impenitent rejecters of Christ will be lost, I would crawl on my bare knees on crushed glass all over London, warning men, night and day, to flee for refuge from the coming day of wrath!"

ILLUS: One of my favorite verses out of II Corinthians is this one:

"But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory...." 2 Corinthians 3:18

The first time I read that I visualized a staircase. God was at the top of the staircase and we all mount the steps toward His glory, step by step, glory unto glory.

When new Christians start out they all begin on the ground floor. Then other members of the body are supposed to take them by the hand and help them mount the steps into the presence and glory of God. That's why Jesus died to establish the church – because we NEED each other. To challenge, encourage, and to confront so that we all make it up the staircase.

ILLUS: One person compared the church to a bowl of grapes. Some congregations are like grapes that just sit there and jostle around in the same container. But other churches are like grapes that have been crushed together and whose juices mix with one another's, so that they can offer a pleasing drink to their master.

A church should be a place where we care about each other enough to mix together.

ILLUS: Back in the first church I served, I got fired because I disciplined a Deacon who was committing adultery. At one of the Board meetings that followed my action, a man (I'll call) Fred spoke up. Fred was a wealthy member who had committed adultery years before and left his first wife to marry the woman he committed adultery with. There was a troubled look in his eyes as he asked me "Do you mean you'd have done this to me when I committed adultery?"

I said "Yes Fred, I'd have confronted you as well."

I was puzzled by Fred's question and by the troubled look in his eyes. His adultery had taken place years before, and I thought he'd repented of that and had experienced forgiveness.

But just a couple years ago I discovered that something about Fred that I didn't know before. Apparently, while I'd been a preacher there Fred was always going down to the local bar, getting drunk... and then he'd proposition the women there. And seemingly everybody in town seemed to know about it – and nearly everybody in church knew about it... except me.

And they all conspired to his death.

The whole congregation conspired to send him to hell because they DID NOT CARE where he ended up as long as his money was there to help them keep the doors open.

And it makes me furious.

I liked Fred. I didn't and don't want him going to hell... but those folks didn't care.

ILLUS: Do you remember what Cain said to God when God asked him where his brother

was?

"Am I my brother's keeper?"

YES... YES YOU ARE!!!

Not because we're more righteous than the next guy... but because we should care what happens to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

CLOSE: A famous preacher named Adrian Rogers once recalled hearing about a nightclub that was called "The Gates of Hades". The story goes that a newcomer to the city was looking for this nightclub and stopped a policeman to ask directions.

It so happened that there was a church on that same street called "Calvary Church" and when the man asked the policeman for directions, the cop replied:

"If you want to get to the Gates of Hades, you'll have to go past Calvary."

You take that story and you apply it to us as a church filled with forgiven sinners.

If we see someone on the way to the Gates of Hades... we ought to say

"If you're going to go to hell you'll have to get past me and past the cross of Jesus Christ."