

How Can You Lay Hold on Eternal Life? 1 Timothy 6:12

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By Bob Wilkin

In 1 Timothy 6:12 Paul charged Timothy with these words:

Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Timothy, like all believers, already had everlasting life (1 Tim 1:2, “my true son in the faith,” and 1 Tim 6:11, “But you, O man of God”; see also 1 Cor 4:17; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 3:2; 2 Tim 1:2). So why would Paul command Timothy to lay hold on everlasting life? And what would that even mean?

Paul was calling upon him to *grasp the potential fullness of eternal life* that is possible. Compare verse 19, where Timothy was instructed to tell rich believers to “[store] up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.” The *good foundation for the time to come* refers to an abundant eternal experience.

This teaching came from the Lord Himself. He said,

“Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?” (Luke 16:11).

Dollars, pesos, yen, euros, dinars, yuan, rubles, and rands are all *unrighteous mammon*. They are not *true riches*. Those riches will be given out at the Judgment Seat of Christ (cf. Matt 6:19–21).

We must cling to the promise of eternal rewards if we want to receive true riches.

In their commentary on Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus, Arichea and Hatton write:

Winning the contest is described in terms of “taking hold” of the reward that is eternal life (for which see 1:16). The picture here is that of the victor in a contest who is handed the champion’s trophy. To take hold of eternal life may simply be one way of saying “win eternal life as the prize of your victory” (p. 154).

I do not know whether they understand the reward to be abundance of life forever or simply being in the kingdom forever. But the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul clearly

believed that the present possession of everlasting life is simply and solely by faith in Christ for everlasting life (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25-27; Eph 2:8-9; 1 Tim 1:16) *and* that fullness of eternal life is a reward (Matt 16:24–27; 19:29; Luke 19:16–26; Gal 6:7–9; 2 Tim 2:12; 4:6–8).

Litfin comments:

Timothy was to give his best effort to this most worthwhile of struggles, the struggle to further the faith. This would involve the complete appropriation (cf. “take hold” in v. 19) at all times of the fact that he possessed eternal life. (Paul’s words, Take hold of...eternal life in no way suggest that Timothy could gain eternal life by his own efforts) (“1 Timothy,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 747).ⁱ

Larson’s comment is helpful as well:

The eternal life which believers enter is not simply a future hope; it is also a present reality. We take hold of this eternal life when we live in the power and values of God’s eternal kingdom. We will not experience the fullness of Christ’s dominion until the future when he reigns over all the earth. But the eternal kind of life is still accessible at the present time. We touch upon it when we order our daily lives in harmony with God and his Spirit (*1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, & Philemon*, p. 247).

In his unpublished class notes on 1-2 Timothy—which we hope to publish in the next year—Zane Hodges said this about 1 Tim 6:12:

It must be borne in mind that eternal life in Scripture is presented both as a gift and as a prize (Mark 10:29-30; Luke 18:29-30). Eternal life is by no means a static item, but an expanding and enlarging experience throughout eternity itself. Christ came that we might have life and that we might have it more abundantly (John 10:10). As a gift, life eternal may be had, but it may only be had more abundantly as a prize.

Note that **fight** (*agōnizou*) is present tense, while **take hold** (*epilabou*) is aorist tense. A lifetime of conflict secures a single momentous result: a real and firm grip on the experience of life eternal. All Christians possess eternal life, but only the victorious seize it!

This is one of a handful of passages that specifically mention the expression *everlasting life* (or *eternal life*)ⁱⁱ as a possible future reward for perseverance in faithful service. For

example, the Lord Jesus told Peter and the other disciples:

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” (Matt 19:29).

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart (Gal 6:7–9).

Notice that perseverance is required (“we shall reap if we do not lose heart”) to reap everlasting life as a reward.ⁱⁱⁱ

How full our experience of eternal life is now and will be forever is conditioned upon our laying hold on eternal life, which means living in a manner consistent with the values of the life to come (1 Tim 6:19).

I’ve never quite understood the saying, attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. and later popularized by Johnny Cash in the song *No Earthly Good*: “He’s so heavenly minded, he’s no earthly good.” The reality, according to the Lord Jesus Himself, is just the opposite. We are in great danger of being so earthly minded that we will be of no heavenly good:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:19–21).

Lay hold on eternal life by keeping grace in focus.

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ⁱ While I understand Litfin’s desire to defend the message of John 3:16, Paul’s words in 1 Tim 6:12 do suggest that Timothy could gain eternal life by his efforts, but not in the sense of the mere possession of that life. Paul was speaking of the need to take hold of eternal life in order to have it more abundantly.

ii The Greek is the same in both cases. For some reasons the NKJV and other translations sometimes translate zōēn aiōnion as *everlasting life* and sometimes as eternal life.

iii I recommend when you teach Gal 6:7-9 you compare it to Eph 2:8-9 and similar faith-alone verses (e.g., John 3:16; 5:39-40; 6:28-29; Rom 4:4-5; Rev 22:17). Sowing and reaping are not *faith-alone apart from works* language. Ask any farmer!