

The Minister's Work

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[0 : 00] Now, if you'd like to follow our reading from the Bible, you'll find this on page 992 in those big blue hardback Bibles, if you have one of those.

I'm reading from the first letter of Paul to Timothy, chapter 4, and I think I'll read just a little bit more than verses 11 to 16. I'll pick up the thread of Paul's letter at verse 6.

And in verse 6, where Paul says these things, he's referring to the teaching that he's been giving to Timothy in the preceding verses. So, 1 Timothy, chapter 4, verse 6.

If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.

Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather, train yourself for godliness. For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

[1 : 11] The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive because we have set our hope upon the living God, who is the saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.

Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.

Practice these things. Devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

I remember hearing the story of two elderly English ladies who were enjoying a cup of tea together one day. And they were discussing their respective grown-up children.

[2 : 30] And one of these ladies had a son who was a parish minister down in England. So her friend said to her, Tell me, Millicent, I've always so much wanted to know. What exactly does your son Horace do?

I know he's a minister, but how does he spend his day? Does he show people round his church? I mean, he must know a great deal about ecclesiastical architecture, and I'm sure about stained glass as well.

It is an important question to ask, isn't it? What does a minister do with his time? And what is going on inside his head? It's a long way, isn't it, from getting up in the morning till going to bed at night. What is going on in a minister's head from seven in the morning till eleven o'clock at night or thereabouts? Well, our lunchtime series for this month of November has the title, Who'd Be a Minister?

And the purpose of this series is to look at the place and work of ministers in the Christian church. Now, this isn't intended to be some kind of a navel-gazing exercise on my part.

[3 : 33] It's simply a reflection of the fact that there are sections of the New Testament, and particularly Paul's letters to Timothy and to Titus, those sections which are about the life and work of ministers.

And these New Testament letters, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, don't come to us in an envelope marked for the eyes of ministers only. No, they're here for the instruction of all Christian people, whether ministers or not.

They're in the layman's Bible as well as in the minister's Bible. So we can be sure that God intends the layman and the laywoman, as much as the minister, to understand something of what the

minister's life and work involves.

And the better that Christians who are not ministers can understand the minister's responsibilities, the more those Christians will be able to love their ministers and work with their ministers and understand their agenda.

You can find churches where the ministers and the people appear to be, not exactly at loggerheads, but not quite to understand one another. You know, our minister, he's been with us for five years, but he doesn't really do the sort of things that we want him to do.

[4 : 38] Or the minister might say, you know, my people are so difficult to work with, they don't really understand me and I don't really understand them either. That can be the position. So if ministers and others can understand what the minister's work is and we can share that understanding, it'll be a real help to all of us.

It's quite possible as well that there may be Christians here today who are not ministers now, but might be ministers one day. And therefore, perhaps our brief studies of these letters might help such folk in thinking about the issues involved.

Now, if you were here last week, you'll remember that we were looking at the third chapter, of 1 Timothy, the first seven verses of it, which is about the qualities or qualifications required in ministers or overseers, as they're described in chapter 3, verse 1.

And we noticed last week that all the qualities required of ministers in those first seven verses of chapter 3 are moral qualities except for one.

And that is, at the end of verse 2, the ability to teach. That's the only quality here which you might describe as an intellectual gift. But it's a very necessary one because Paul, the apostle, has laid out his concerns forcefully at the beginning of chapter 1, almost the catalyst or reason for why he writes the letter to Timothy.

[5 : 54] And his big concern that he mentions in chapter 1, verse 3, is that there are false teachers at Ephesus, people who are teaching different doctrine, doctrine that is not in accord with the true gospel as taught by the apostles.

And if that false doctrine is to be effectively driven out of the churches, Timothy, as a senior church leader with responsibility for appointing elders and leaders, is going to have to appoint ministers who are able to teach, able to teach the true doctrine.

So if these folk don't have the intellectual ability to distinguish the true from the false or the ability to teach the distinction between the true and the false, then they won't be able to bury this false doctrine.

Now Paul is not suggesting that they have to be university professors. Not at all. There are quite a few effective Bible teachers, and you'll know some, who have little in the way of formal academic training.

But there still needs to be the ability to teach because false doctrine, as much in the 21st century as in the 1st century, is constantly snapping at the heels of sound doctrine and is seeking to bring it down.

[7 : 02] So that's the scenario in 1 Timothy. Timothy needs to find teachers for the churches because the best way to drive out falsehood is to teach the truth. However, Paul the Apostle knows that if a person is to be an effective minister over time, over the long haul, a lot more is required than just one intellectual gift.

And that is why Paul takes time and trouble in chapter 4 to take Timothy further into the life of a minister. So we'll look together at this passage, verses 6 to 16, because in these verses, Paul is teaching Timothy how to be, and I'm quoting here from verse 6, how to be a good servant of Christ Jesus.

And can we notice three things in particular? Three things in particular. First, train yourself. Train yourself. There it is in verse 7. Have nothing to do with irreverent silly myths.

Rather, train yourself for godliness. The implication is that these false teachers at Ephesus were preoccupied with irreverent silly myths. It all sounded very spiritual, perhaps, and esoteric, but Paul dismisses it as folly and nonsense.

Have nothing to do with that kind of so-called spirituality, he's saying. Timothy, what you need to do instead is to train yourself for godliness. And then he unpacks what he means in the next verse, verse 8.

[8 : 29] For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life of the world to come, or the life to come.

In other words, you can go jogging in Bella Houston Park on a Sunday morning, if you really want to, and your waistline might just shrink by one sixteenth of an inch after half an hour's hard jogging. So there is some kind of value in bodily training, Paul is saying. But godliness, he says, is far more valuable because it's as much about the life to come as it is about the present life. The present life only lasts for a few more years, doesn't it?

I mean, look at us. We're hastening towards the grave, aren't we? Even those who are only twenty or thirty. It isn't very long. But the life of the world to come is for eternity, and that is the life to train for, says Paul.

And the training is not physical fitness, it's training in godliness, he's saying. Now let's notice from verse 7, who Timothy's trainer is to be.

[9 : 31] Is it some holiness guru? Is it to be Paul? Is it to be the Lord? No. It is to be Timothy himself. Train yourself, says Paul, in godliness.

Now there's no doubt that Paul had trained Timothy quite a lot as they were travelling around as missionaries together in the previous years. But Timothy is now older, and Paul is no longer with him.

So Timothy has to be his own trainer. This means that the church leader, the minister, has to look at his own life with all its complexities and contradictions, and all its strengths and weaknesses, and then he has to take responsibility for training his life in godliness.

And he finds that the raw material of his life is by no means grade one material. Wouldn't it be lovely if the raw material of the minister's life was naturally godly?

But it never is. A young minister, just starting out, can possibly fool a doting great-aunt. She'll see him going to work in his first parish, and she'll say, what a nice young man he is.

[10 : 37] Just look at him. He's so clean-cut and fresh-faced. Goodness and sweetness obviously shine out of his every pore. John Newton, the hymn writer, he knew what kind of a young man he was.

You know the words. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a grade one specimen of humanity like me. No, a wretch. And he was a fine minister of the gospel, and that fine minister was not exaggerating when he called himself a wretch.

I've been working with Willie Philip here for the last two or three months. Not long enough for the two of us to have got to know each other terribly well yet, but I can assure you that Willie by nature is a grade one gangster and brigand.

And the reason I know that is that the Bible tells me so. And of course Willie knows that exactly the same thing is true of me in reverse. So why did Paul have to tell Timothy to train himself in godliness?

Because he knew that Timothy was ungodly by nature. If goodness and sweetness had shone out of Timothy's every pore, Paul would never have had to tell him to train himself to be godly.

[11 : 45] It is because the minister is a sinful wretch that he has to train himself and go on training himself in godliness. Now more specifically, how is he to do this?

You'll notice that Paul outlined some of the main areas in verse 12. Let me read a little bit of verse 12. Set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

We'll look briefly at those five. In speech. Now Paul is not talking here about gifted oratory. He's talking about Timothy's normal everyday conversations with other people in the churches. If a minister's words and conversation are godly, gracious, stimulating, and honoring to God, then the believers in the church are going to be built up and encouraged.

But if the minister's words are spoiled by coarseness or outbursts of temper or nastiness, the believers are going to be dismayed and bewildered. Then conduct.

Conduct. If a minister's life and conduct rings true to the standards of the gospel, other people in the church are going to be spurred on to live with the same kind of integrity.

[12 : 56] But if other people look at this minister and they say, you know, there's something about that minister's life which doesn't ring true. His influence for the good is bound to be spoiled. Then next, in love.

The minister is called upon to be a very loving person. Now he's not an ivory tower figure. He's called to love his brothers and sisters in the church.

This will mean that he draws as close to them as he possibly can so as to listen to their sorrows and their pains and so as to understand what's going on in their hearts so that he can encourage the

good things that are going on in their hearts but also lovingly confront and challenge the not so good things that are going on in their hearts.

Then in faith, perhaps the minister's faith is most useful as an example to other believers when it is being most deeply and hardly tested.

I've recently had contact with a minister and his wife in their late 50s whose faith has been very much tested by the wayward behaviour over many months of their daughter.

[14:04] This minister and his wife have both suffered in health especially the wife and they've been deeply traumatised by what their daughter has been doing. But members of their congregation see this couple continuing to love the Lord and trust him and his sovereignty and the congregation see them continuing to love and to teach the fellowship and what an example that is to other Christians when a minister's faith holds firm and sure in the midst of great testing.

Quite easy for a minister's faith to hold firm when everything is going nicely but when the testing comes that's when the example comes too. And then purity in purity. I mentioned this last week but I may as well mention it again.

The four main danger points that can defile the purity of a minister's life are sex, alcohol, money and bad temper. So we need to pray for the purity of our ministers particularly in those four areas because when a minister does go wrong at one of those points a congregation can be very deeply damaged and it can take years for a congregation to recover from the damage.

So there's this first thing that Paul says to Timothy train yourself for godliness. The minister needs to be in constant training because his sinful nature is constantly clamouring to get the upper hand. Now second devote yourself devote yourself. You see that phrase comes twice here in verse 13 and again in verse 15. So verse 13 until I come devote yourself to the public reading of scripture to exhortation to teaching and then verse 15 practice these things devote yourself to them so that all may see your progress.

[15:45] Now let's think about this verb for a moment devote yourself. It's a demanding thing that's what Paul is saying it requires energy concentration and single mindedness.

Devote yourself to the task don't dissipate your energies in a hundred different activities devote yourself to what? Well this is where my two English elderly ladies would have choked on their cucumber sandwiches because Horace the Reverend Horace is not to devote himself to showing visitors the stained glass windows he is to devote himself verse 13 to the public reading of scripture to exhortation and to teaching.

Now brothers and sisters this is really getting to the heart of the minister's task and work here. This is what is to fill his vision. It's this which is to bend his every mental faculty into action.

This is the sort of thing he needs to be thinking about at three o'clock in the morning when he can't sleep. Next Sunday's sermon it's the public reading of scripture exhortation and teaching. Now that phrase the public reading of scripture may seem to suggest a kind of elocution lesson beautiful diction audibility and excellent pronunciation that sort of thing but that's not what Paul is concerned about here at all.

Of course when the Bible is read out loud at public meetings it needs to be read audibly and read well otherwise there's no point in reading it at all. But Paul is concerned with scripture being read but then followed immediately by exhortation from it and teaching of its meaning.

[17:13] So the three things the reading the exhorting and the teaching go together. Reading the Bible in public by itself without those other two things is only of limited value.

Of course the word of God is powerful and it may speak to some people but how often we've been to a church meeting and we've heard the Bible read possibly read very well and clearly and yet somehow it's sailed past our ears and has hardly touched the sides at all.

Our concentration is often only half there isn't it? Maybe we're thinking about the Sunday roast or the visit to the dentist on Monday. What we need as well as the reading of scripture is the exhortation and the teaching of the passage as well.

That's what makes us sit up and take notice. Teaching means drawing out its meaning applying it to real life and heart and will and conscience. And exhortation means strong encouragement ramming the message home if you like so that both preacher and hearers alike feel the sharp edge of the word of God.

Now Timothy is to devote himself to these things and if they fill his vision it means that other things are bound to have to take second place. Sometimes let's imagine a lady member of the congregation who wants to get in touch with the minister one day and so she gets on the phone.

[18 : 32] Can I speak to John please? Is that the man's? No? I do need to speak to him rather urgently. You see we've got to work out the tea rota for the Tuesday evening fellowship and I do need to ask him urgently about the sausages and baked apples for the bonfire.

You say he's not available all day. What's he doing? Preparing for Sunday? Do you mean choosing the hymns? No.

Preparing the sermon? But it's only Thursday isn't it? I mean surely he can wait till Saturday evening before he starts on that little job. Now you get the point don't you of my imaginary conversation.

That church member perhaps felt frustrated that she couldn't get in touch with the minister but that church member should have jumped for joy to know that her minister was determined to obey 1 Timothy 4.13.

She should have thanked God with all her heart for sending her church a minister who was serious about teaching the Bible. Practice these things verse 15 devote yourself to them says Paul so that all may see your progress.

[19 : 40] Yes progress. When a minister devotes himself to these things he will make progress. It means he will become better at it. His teaching will become riper more full of understanding.

His Bible teaching won't become more mellow and more soothing. No it will become sharper and more stimulating and for that reason more deeply instructive and more truly encouraging.

It will wake people up and make them thrilled as they come to understand the scriptures more fully. So Timothy is to train himself in godliness. He is to devote himself to the reading and teaching and exhortation from scripture and then thirdly he is to watch himself.

Verse 16 Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. The parent of a toddler has to watch that toddler like a hawk because the toddler is always threatening to get into scrapes and difficulties and in the same way the minister has to watch himself because he too is in constant danger.

When I was a little boy and I first had contact with Christian ministers vicars down in England I used to think that somehow they lived in a different hemisphere from the rest of people. These vicars they lived in a lovely safe world it seemed to me of angels and organ music a gentle ordered protected golden life nourished by weak tea and radio three and untouched by pain.

[21 : 13] Now of course that is not the case and because the minister is the same as other people and lives amidst the same trials and the same pressures he has to watch himself very closely and the kind of questions he needs to keep asking himself are these Self are you praying?

Are you thankful? Are you full of gratitude to the Lord? Is your understanding of the Bible and of the gospel growing with the years? Are you reading the Bible with growing relish?

Are you reading books that help you to understand the Bible and the Christian life better? Are you continuing to do battle with the world the flesh and the devil? Or are you allowing their influence to creep into your soul?

Are you loving your wife? Are you loving your children? Are you very much loving your congregation? Are you longing for heaven? Are you taking the evangelistic opportunities whenever they pop up?

Are you sitting loose and likely to money and possessions and the things of this world? And are you learning to love the Lord Jesus more and more? Those are the kind of questions and many others which a minister who is watching himself closely will need to ask.

[22 : 22] But verse 16 tells Timothy that he must watch his teaching as well as his life. If his teaching and that's going to imply the teaching of his colleagues around him in that teaching is there real instruction in full-blooded Bible Christianity or is it perhaps just a few thoughts put together in odd moments of spare time?

If the Bible shapes and drives and determines the content of the minister's teaching he is never going to run out of material. He's never going to find himself scratching his head halfway through the week and saying desperately and despondently to his wife I wonder darling what on earth I can say in the pulpit this coming Sunday.

If he lived to be 300 years old and had the combined brain power of Augustine, Calvin and Einstein he would never exhaust scripture. The Bible is indefinitely preachable.

Ministers who are not diligent Bible students may well be warm and loving human beings and supportive and they may well speak clearly and attractively in the pulpit but ultimately their teaching

will lack weight.

It won't convey God's message. It's bound to end up as a vehicle for their own opinions and speculations. These opinions may be quite interesting but what a congregation needs in order to prepare itself for life and particularly for death is the voice of God and only the diligent Bible student will be able to convey that as he unfolds the Bible week after week after week.

[23 : 51] The Bible is God preaching to the world and the minister enables the voice of God to be heard as he unpacks the message of the Bible. And what is the consequence of the minister watching himself and his teaching?

Well there it is in the second half of verse 16. Persist in this for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. So the final outcome of this way of life is salvation both of the minister and of those he teaches.

And salvation being saved in Paul's dictionary means eternal safety in heaven. So the great goal of Paul's gospel is beyond this world out of this world.

One of the dangers that we face in the modern church is the danger that theology becomes little more than a branch of psychology. So a word like salvation is often interpreted in terms of becoming psychologically sound or emotionally whole so that life on earth this life can be better enjoyed.

Now thank God to be a Christian and to grow as a Christian is a great boost to personal happiness and emotional maturity. But the focus of Paul's gospel and the focus of the whole of the New Testament is on the eternal consequences of the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

[25 : 10] The problem faced and dealt with and answered by the New Testament gospel is not the problem of how little me can become happy and emotionally secure in this life.

It is the problem of how God can eternally rescue a race of rebels who live under his deserved anger. What we need to be rescued from is not our emotional pains and immaturities, however difficult and real they may be, but from what Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 as the wrath to come.

Now this is why the minister needs to watch his life and his teachings so closely because the eternal safety of many people hangs on his life and teaching. If he persists, says Paul, in guarding his life and his teaching, he and many others will be saved in the end.

So friends, let's keep praying for our ministers. We ministers are frail creatures. It is so possible for any minister to grow despondent, to fall into sin, to lose the plot as far as the Bible goes and to stop teaching the message of scripture.

Timothy is to train himself in godliness, to devote himself to the reading and teaching of scripture and to watch himself and his teaching closely. If he and his successors in the 21st century will do this, our churches will be powerfully revived.

[26 : 37] Let's bow our heads and pray. Our gracious Father, we think of this glorious message of eternal salvation through Christ and we think of its power and wonder and continual relevance as we think of the world around us concerned with its own business.

And our prayer therefore, dear Father, is that you will so help ministers and indeed whole congregations to love the scripture and to be involved in teaching it as widely as possible that many more people in this city and throughout our country will come to Christ and will be set on board for heaven because they've come to believe in the Lord Jesus and have put their trust in him.

And these things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Lovely to see you friends. Do stay for as long as you like and do have a browse at our bookstore.

Thank you. Thank you.