

The Minister's Priorities

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Date: 23 November 2005

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[0 : 00] Well, if you'd like to follow our Bible reading for today, it's the second letter of Paul to Timothy. If you have one of these big hardback blue Bibles, it's on page 995.

Second Timothy, and I'm reading chapter 2 and verses 1 to 15. I think I'll stop at verse 15. So, 2 Timothy, chapter 2 and verse 1.

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.

An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.

[1 : 03] Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything. Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal.

But the word of God is not bound. Therefore, I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

The saying is trustworthy. For if we have died with him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we deny him, he also will deny us.

If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself. Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. Well, our series of Wednesday lunchtime services has the title, Who'd Be a Minister?

[2 : 21] And today's title is The Minister's Priorities, from this section of 2 Timothy, Chapter 2. Now, it's really quite fun, especially if you're a minister, to see how ministers are caricatured in books and in television presentations.

Let me ask, can you buy Postman Pat books north of the border? Has Postman Pat been released from England and allowed to come to Scotland? Yes. Well, in that case, you may know that one of Postman Pat's best friends in Greendale Village is the Reverend Timms, and he's a great caricature of the English country parson.

His main concerns appear to be the weekly choir practice, the bell ringing, the upkeep of the village church, and as he rides around the village on his old-fashioned bicycle, he seems to say things to people like, The Lord helps those who help themselves.

So, that seems to be about the extent of his ministry, and he's very popular. Or, do you remember the vicar in the Dad's Army sketches? All teeth and platitudes.

Remember him? That sort of a vicar. Occasionally, we get a different type of TV minister, and that is the world-weary cynic who's lost his way. Either he's having an affair, and he's trying to keep that concealed from his congregation, or perhaps he's lost his faith altogether, and he's just going through the motions of taking services and doing his pastoral work, although he no longer believes a word of the creed or of the Bible.

[3 : 52] But the type of minister that we don't often see portrayed on television is the type of minister that Paul is describing in 1 and 2 Timothy, and that is the real minister.

So, let's turn to the second chapter of 2 Timothy, and we'll see what Paul has to say to his younger colleague about the nature of his work, and particularly what the priorities of the minister should be.

Now, this is unashamedly an imperative passage. I wonder if you noticed that as I read it out. There is one command, one imperative following after another. So, verse 1, be strengthened.

Verse 2, entrust. Verse 3, share in suffering. Verse 8, remember Jesus Christ. Verse 14, remind them. Verse 15, do your best.

And so on and so forth. So, Paul is not speaking to Timothy in an if-you-would-you-kindly fashion. He's saying rather, brother, you've got a job on your hands, so set about it with vigour and determination.

[4 : 54] So, let's look at the first three paragraphs of this second chapter under four headings. First, the real minister draws on the strength of Christ. Look with me at verse 1.

You then, my child, be strengthened. I think the New International Version says, be strong. Be strengthened in the grace of Christ. Now, if Timothy has to be strengthened, it's pretty obvious that Paul regards him as weak.

Now, that's no slur on Timothy, because Paul regarded himself as being weak. We can take it that weakness is the norm for ministers. I remember an incident when I was a young minister, assistant minister, in a parish in Manchester.

And one Sunday evening, we had a visiting preacher come to us. And he was an experienced man who'd been around the block. And we had the evening service, and then afterwards, there was an informal meeting over cups of tea, and he was talking informally about the work of ministers in parishes.

And I remember at one point, his eye fell on me. I felt a little bit exposed and embarrassed at this point. But he pointed me, because I was the young assistant minister, he pointed me out to all the people sitting there. And he said, now take young Edward here.

[6 : 04] A young man like him, he'll go off into his first parish as the minister. He'll throw out his chest. That was his phrase. He'll throw out his chest. And he'll say to the congregation, we'll do this and we'll do that.

And in six to twelve months, we'll have really transformed this parish for the kingdom of God. And then, said this older man, then the young minister discovers that it's not quite as easy as that. He finds unexpected hindrances, angular individuals, vested interests, tenaciously held private agendas with a Do Not Disturb sign written across them.

He suddenly feels a bit like a man who's entered a marathon, but after only half a mile, he finds that he's very short of breath. He feels weak. Well, he's in good company.

Paul himself often felt extremely weak. Thinking back to his second letter to the Corinthians, he once wrote, Who is weak? And I'm not weak. But in that same second Corinthian letter, he also wrote, For when I'm weak, then I'm strong.

[7 : 11] And he explains, 2 Corinthians 12, that he had learned to draw upon the grace of Christ to meet his need for strength. In fact, he tells the Corinthians that Christ had said to him, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

And it's surely out of that kind of experience that Paul had so often had, that he's able to write to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2 verse 1, Be strengthened by the grace. Notice it's the same word.

My grace is sufficient for you, in 2 Corinthians 12. Be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Paul had so often been at his wit's end only to find that the grace of Christ was available then to strengthen him.

Now, speaking in very practical terms, what will it mean for a Christian minister, or for any Christian, to draw upon the strength of Christ? How are we to go about the Christian life not in our own strength, but in Christ's strength?

Well, really, there's no secret formula for tapping into the strength of the Lord. What Paul means for Timothy to do is surely something like this. Timothy needs to turn to the Lord in prayer regularly, acknowledge his weakness, and pray to the Lord to strengthen him for the immediate task ahead, and then go out and do the task.

[8 : 30] Almost certainly, he won't feel any stronger after praying. He won't feel like Popeye in the moment after he's taken the can of spinach. He won't suddenly feel great spiritual muscles bulging in his biceps.

But as he goes out and does the next task, whatever that task is, preaching the next sermon, chairing the Kirk session meeting, handling some difficult pastoral situation, whatever it is, he will find that moment by moment, the Lord is supplying him with the energy that he needs.

He doesn't need to worry about tomorrow. Give us this day, our daily bread, one day at a time. Fresh strength for one day is all that he needs. Let me put it like this.

Isn't it kind of the Lord to allow us to feel so grotty first thing in the morning? If we leapt out of bed first thing in the morning saying, I can tackle the world, I can take on the universe, we'd probably never pray at all, would we?

But because we stumble out of bed and we almost collapse halfway down the stairs on our way to breakfast, it's because we're so weak we're reminded of it and therefore we pray at the beginning of the day. So let's thank the Lord tomorrow morning when we feel awful.

[9 : 42] So there's the first thing. The real minister draws on the grace or the strength of the Lord Jesus. Now having said that in verse 1, you'll see that Paul's line of thought runs straight on into verse 2.

And, what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. So here's our second point from verse 2.

And that is that the real minister trains other faithful Christians to teach the Bible. Now let's notice carefully from verse 2 what it is that Timothy is to entrust to faithful men.

What he is to entrust to others is what he has heard from Paul. What you have heard from me entrust to others. So it's Paul's gospel that Timothy is to pass on.

In fact, Paul makes the same point back in chapter 1 verse 13. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me. Or again, chapter 2 verse 8. Remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel.

[10 : 48] The gospel according to Paul. Now isn't that intriguing? For Paul to speak like that makes clear that he regarded himself as the guardian of the faith.

The true gospel that Timothy is to pass on is Paul's gospel. Is Paul then arrogantly claiming that the true gospel originated with him?

Not at all. For he says in Galatians chapter 1, I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me, my gospel, is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

The Lord Jesus revealed this gospel to me. That's what he's saying. And that is why Paul is so determined to preserve the gospel in its unadulterated and pure form. Because his gospel is the very thing that Jesus revealed to him.

Paul's gospel is Jesus' gospel. What Paul explains and applies in his New Testament letters and in his teaching and preaching in the Acts of the Apostles is Jesus' gospel explained and applied.

[11 : 54] And that is why Timothy is under orders not to change it, neither to enlarge Paul's gospel nor to trim it down. And that is why Timothy is to search out other Christians who in their turn will pass this gospel on intact to other people.

Now let's notice from verse 2 just what kind of people Timothy is to look for. Paul mentions two essential characteristics in verse 2. The first is that they are to be faithful men.

Now of course that means that they must be Christians so men of faith in that sense. But Paul probably means rather more. He probably means as well that they need to be loyal people.

People with the capacity to be loyal to Paul and loyal to Jesus. Now a minister cannot be like that if he's full of himself. I guess we've all met ministers who talk a great deal about themselves about their own achievements and their own ministry.

I went here and I went there and I did this and all these people and all that sort of thing. But the faithful minister promotes not his own ministry but the ministry of Christ.

[13 : 03] Remember 2 Corinthians? What we preach is not ourselves says Paul but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Christ's sake. So Timothy must seek out people who will be faithful to Paul's teaching and thus to Christ's teaching and who will want to promote the ministry of Christ.

So faithful people. And then secondly the people Timothy seeks out must be end of verse 2 able to teach others also. The next generation of ministers need to be not only faithful and loyal to Paul and Jesus but they also need to be able to teach the message.

And of course not everybody has that kind of ability. Just think of the congregation that you belong to because I know many of you come from other congregations than this one. In your congregation hopefully there will be plenty of loyal and faithful people and some of them perhaps just a very small number of those loyal and faithful folk will also have the ability to teach the Bible gospel.

Why don't you ask your minister one day very lovingly very supportively if he is taking steps to train those people in gospel ministry. If he replies that he is too busy to be able to train others and we have to face the fact that many ministers these days are over busy.

If that's what he says why not see if you and he and perhaps one or two others in your church can work together and work out ways of freeing up his time. It may be that he is overwhelmed with funerals.

[14 : 34] It's possible that from now till March which is the funeral season he is having to do about four a week. It may be that he is chairing about half a dozen different committees in the church and five of them could be handed on to somebody else.

So why not try and work out ways with him to see if other people can take some of the burdens off him so that he can then give quality time to training up a few people might only be two or three but a few people who match the description of verse 2.

That's how the churches of this generation can provide leaders and teachers for the people of the next generation. So the real minister trains other faithful Christians to teach the Bible.

Now thirdly the real minister sticks at his work enduringly. We're looking here at verses 3 to 13. I won't be able to comment on all of it of course but we'll pick up one or two points.

The real minister sticks at the work. Paul mentioned suffering in verse 3 and in his mind that idea is closely connected with the enduring that he mentions in verse 10. So the burden of these verses is Timothy keep going.

[15 : 40] And those of us who are ministers we need to hear that message again and again because the temptation to drop out of the race if you like to go back to Civvy Street to acquire a way of life that can be very strong.

I remember years ago when I was a young minister being at a conference of ministers and the speaker on that occasion was a senior man he must have been 50 or so and he was the pastor of a very large and very fine church in the south of England.

He was doing a very good job and I remember him saying do you know there's not a week that goes by when I don't say to my wife darling I've got to resign I cannot go on it's too much it's too difficult but he didn't resign and that church flourished because he was prepared to keep going.

Now this is what Paul is saying to Timothy here keep going brother and to drive his point home he uses three illustrations and two examples and we'll just look at these briefly. Illustration number one is that of the soldier in verse 4.

No soldier he says gets entangled in civilian pursuits since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. So the message is Timothy keep focused don't get entangled with other things don't give your energies to non-essentials and the incentive is to please your commanding officer to please the Lord Jesus that is a very sweet incentive to the minister to keep going it is to please him.

[17 : 06] Illustration number two is that of the athlete in verse 5. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. So the message here is Timothy don't cut any corners.

If the 10,000 metre runner cuts a corner he's disqualified. So Timothy you stick to the right principles in your work and be thorough. And the incentive? There it is in the verse.

You'll be crowned. Perhaps Paul is beginning to think across already to what he writes about being crowned in chapter 4 verse 8. But there's a crown the reward. Then illustration number three is that of the farmer in verse 6.

It is the hard working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. So the message here is work hard Timothy. Don't begrudge people the long hours of concentration and effort.

The incentive is that you will have the first share of the harvest home supper. There's great joy and celebration and banqueting up ahead. So don't worry if your fingers get cut and calloused and blistered now because of the hard work.

[18 : 12] And then verse 7. Think over these illustrations that I've just given and you'll find that the penny will drop. The Lord will help you Timothy to understand that the joy of pleasing him of being crowned and of banqueting in heaven will far outweigh any difficulties that you may have to get through in the remainder of your life on earth.

And then Paul stiffens Timothy's resolve with two examples. The first is there in verse 8. Remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead the offspring of David as preached in my gospel.

Now why does Paul bring Jesus in at this point? Because he is the prime example of enduring and being prepared to suffer. We mustn't forget that Timothy and Paul were facing horrible persecutions

at the hands of Emperor Nero and his henchmen at this time in history.

It may be quite hard to endure as a Christian minister in modern Britain but it was much harder in the Roman Empire of the first century. I'd forgotten this until I happened to re-read it in Hebrews a week or so ago but Hebrews 13.23 mentions that our brother Timothy has just been released. Very interesting reference at the very end of Hebrews our brother Timothy has just been released. that's a happy verse because Hebrews was probably written some years after to Timothy and if Timothy was in jail after he'd received this letter presumably he obeyed what Paul had said in this letter and refused to shrink from suffering when his turn came.

[19 : 44] Anyway, I'm digressing a bit from verse 8. In verse 8 Timothy is to remember Jesus because Jesus refused to shrink from the cross. Look how Paul describes Jesus in verse 8.

Risen from the dead that is to say divine and wonderfully exalted and the offspring of David that is to say the Messiah of Old Testament promise the King of Israel the one of whom Isaiah said that the government shall be upon his shoulder and the increase of his government there will be no end. This great great Jesus Christ the prototype of the resurrection the King for whom faithful Israel had been waiting for generations this great great King Paul is saying had to suffer and if our exalted King was prepared to suffer then surely Timothy you'll count it an honour to follow in his footsteps. Remember Jesus Christ Timothy remember him and you won't give up. But then there's this second example and that's the example of Paul himself. Verse 9 I am suffering for this gospel bound with chains as if I were a criminal.

So what is it that keeps Paul going as a Christian and as a preacher? Well it's there at the end of verse 9 I may be bound with chains but here's the good news the word of God is not bound therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect.

[21 : 09] So as Paul sits there in that rotten horrible Roman prison gagged muddled as far as gospel preaching was concerned he couldn't say anything himself but his heart leaps for joy as he remembers that the word of God is not chained.

He's grounded and stationary tied to the floor but he pictures the word of God unbound and unbindable rapidly colonizing the cities of the Mediterranean area.

And who can bind the gospel with a chain? Many governments and rulers have tried to do it but the harder they try to tie it down the quicker it seems to sprout and get away. Think of what has happened in China in the last 50 years or so.

In 1950 when Western missionaries were expelled from China there were about a million Christians in the Chinese church. Now 60 million 70 million under communism which has been fiercely opposing the gospel in that country.

So it's that kind of thought that keeps Paul going. See the logic of verses 9 and 10. It's because the word of God is not bound that Paul is prepared to endure everything including prison and flogging and execution for the sake of the elect those who are on their way to becoming Christians but are not yet that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

[22 : 30] And it's this same consideration that will keep the Timothy's of today going. They may feel at times fettered and trapped as Paul did. They may have their share of disappointments and buffetings and bruising but when they remember what kept Paul going they will keep going too and that is the knowledge that the word of God is unbound.

It's let loose and through it the merciful God is continuing to bring people to salvation every day. So whenever we're tempted to give up being gospel people let's remember Jesus Christ and remember Paul.

The real minister sticks at the work enduringly. Now fourth and last the real minister rightly handles the word of truth.

Verse 15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved a worker who has no need to be ashamed rightly handling the word of truth. So the word of truth is the Bible and Timothy's job is to handle this scripture the Bible correctly.

It makes me think of the top class rugby players that you see in the big rugby matches at Twicken and Moore the Millennium Stadium at Cardiff and Murrayfield.

[23 : 47] Just think of the way the really good players can handle a rugby ball at high speed and with the modern slow motion replay techniques and zoom lenses and so on you can admire their skill all the more as they twist the ball and flick it and put just the right weight and direction on their passes.

Now Timothy is to handle scripture with that kind of skill. And to do that according to verse 15 that will win him God's approval so that at the end he won't be ashamed he won't come in red faced and embarrassed at the final whistle.

Now the verb translated rightly handling literally means cutting a straight path as though you are making a Roman road. Timothy needs in his teaching to cut a straight path so that the Bible's message can enter the human heart straight and true.

And if Timothy is to handle the word of truth rightly it will mean two things. First the Christian minister is first and foremost a teacher of the Bible.

That is his work. It takes place most obviously when he's in the pulpit but it's not just pulpit work it's a far wider thing than that. He needs to be cutting a straight road for the Bible when he's speaking at a school assembly to children or when he's counselling a person in distress.

[25 : 04] He'll be asking what part of the Bible is going to help this person most so that they can be comforted and strengthened by the truth of God. He'll be using the Bible to help those who are dying.

Imagine me on my deathbed aged 80, 85 or whatever propped up on the pillows and sucking weak tea out of a spout. You know picture the scene and there I am and Willie Philip my young friend who will be perhaps a lot older than he is now but he'll say to Rebecca his wife one day I must go and see poor old Edward he's on his last legs he needs comfort and strength.

What's he going to say to me when he comes to me? Is he going to say cheer up Edward you'll be fine in a week or two we'll get you back on your porridge you'll be running around again you'll be full of life is that going to help me at that stage?

That would be simply lies wouldn't it if I'm dying I know I'm dying and he knows I'm dying if he tells me some untruth like that it isn't going to help me at all what he needs to do to bring me real comfort at that point is to tell me the gospel my body will be falling to pieces my mind will be beginning to get hazy what I need is the comfort and reassurance of hearing these great truths of scripture again so I'll say if I can say it I'll say Willie read me Romans read me big chunks of the book of Revelation read me whole chapters of Isaiah and as the words of scripture come into my mind and heart again I'll be reassured that the gospel is the truth and that next week I'll be on my way to heaven that's what the minister needs to be doing handling the word of God in such a way that it comes home and does its work and then secondly Bible teachers lastly must work hard at their Bible study all the way through life if they're to have that kind of ministry it's not enough just to do three years study at college when you're 25 that study has to go on regularly as a discipline month in month out until the minister is about 90 and then if the minister does that he can go on cutting a straight path down which he can send the word of God speeding into people's hearts for their comfort and blessing so the real minister draws on the strength of Christ because he's weak he trains other faithful Christians to teach the Bible to provide for the next generation he sticks at the work enduringly because he remembers that the word of God is not bound and he rightly handles the word of truth because knowing that he does that it will have its effect and bring comfort challenge and help to those who hear it so friends let's bow our heads and pray now for our ministers our dear heavenly father we thank you so much for this letter of Paul and we thank you that although he challenges Timothy very much to this difficult work at the same time the blessings and the incentives and the encouragements are so great and we do pray for the ministers that we know and love and cherish especially the ministers of our own congregations and we ask that you will sustain them and despite their busyness and the hard work that they're engaged in that you will give them joy in their work and enable them to fulfil their task according to the teaching of the Apostle Paul please bear them up and may their work be very fruitful we pray and we ask it in Jesus name
Amen