

# The Minister's First Task

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, our Bible reading is taken from Paul's second letter to Timothy, and if you have one of the blue Bibles, you'll find it on page 996.

So I'm reading 2 Timothy, chapter 3, verse 10, to chapter 4, verse 5. You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra, which persecutions I endured.

Yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

[ 1 : 33 ] I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom, preach the word.

Be ready in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke and exhort with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. Well, we come today to the last in our little series about the work of the Christian minister, and our title is The Minister's First Task.

And you'll see just what that first task is, because the Apostle Paul spells it out in the first three words of chapter 4, verse 2. Preach the word.

Those three words, I think you might say, are the jugular vein of 2 Timothy. It's in those three words that the heartbeat of 2 Timothy is felt most powerfully. Now, before you say inside yourself, well, surely every minister knows that his first task is to preach the word.

[ 2 : 59 ] Before you say that, let me tell you that when I went off to ordination training in the Church of England in the 1970s, I went to a college that was known for being, broadly speaking, an evangelical college.

The staff members who taught us were believing men who trusted Christ as Saviour and Lord, and accepted the Bible as the word of God. They were hard-working and godly people. But during my three years of training at that college, I think I received four hours of instruction in preaching.

I don't mean four hours a week. I mean four hours in three years. So it wasn't obvious to our tutors, godly men that they were, that preaching the word was the first task of the minister.

Now, I don't want to blacken my old college's name. There was much good about it, and still is. We had plenty of useful instruction in the Old Testament and the New Testament, church history, Christian doctrine, and so on.

We certainly studied the Bible, but we weren't taught, at least not at all seriously, how to preach the word. And yet here in 2 Timothy, as I hope we'll see over the next few minutes, this is the big command.

[ 4 : 12 ] Think of the situation. Paul the apostle is about to die. He says as much in verse 6, where he says, the time of my departure has come. And he's writing this letter to Timothy, his most trusted co-leader, so as to prepare Timothy to take on the role of leadership that he, Paul, is now having to

lay aside.

And verse 2 sums up most concisely what Timothy is to do. He is to preach the word. Now what I'd like to do today is first of all to look carefully at verse 2, and to ask just what Paul the apostle means by it.

And then I want to look at two great incentives that Paul gives Timothy in these first five verses of chapter 4. Incentives which are going to keep him laboring at the task of verse 2.

So let's first then look at the commandment itself. Timothy is to preach the word. Now the word is God's word, God's message. If you like, God's urgent sermon to the world.

It's the same thing as the sound teaching of verse 3, or the truth of verse 4, or the faith of verse 7. It's not something invented by Paul, or thought up by later generations of Christians.

[ 5 : 25 ] It's given by God to the whole church. Looking back to chapter 3, verse 16, it's the Old Testament scriptures, breathed out by God, together with what Paul the apostle calls in chapter 3, verse 10, my teaching.

So for all practical purposes, from our point of view, it is the whole Bible. And Timothy is to preach this word. The verb translated to preach means to be a herald.

In other words, to announce it loud and clear. So it isn't enough for Timothy just to hear the word. It's not enough for him to believe it. It's not enough for him to practice it.

As a church leader, he must preach it. And Paul tells him how to in verse 2. Let me draw out the force of verse 2 under four little headings. And each of these headings is an adverb.

First, the word must be preached urgently. Be ready, says Paul, in season and out of season. And that verb, be ready, literally means to be on hand or to be on standby.

[ 6 : 29 ] Be on standby, Timothy. So whenever the opportunity comes, the minister is to take the opportunity. He hasn't got to wait till next Sunday in the pulpit. So for example, somebody might stop the minister in the street at nine o'clock at night in cold winter weather just outside the fish and chip shop.

And the minister's heading for that door. He's hungry. And that gorgeous smell of the deep fat fryer is drifting out across the pavement. You know that feeling, don't you? I know it well. But somebody stops the minister at that moment and asks him a serious question about God.

Well, he is going to stop and answer that question seriously and lovingly because he's ready out of season as well as in season. He must preach the word urgently, whenever the opportunity arises.

Then secondly, the word must be preached courageously. Do you see how Paul says in verse 2, reprove, rebuke and exhort. So Paul is picturing the situation where the Christian leader comes up against error of some kind, a wrong understanding of God or of the gospel or of Christian ethics.

And the Christian leader, when he comes up against this kind of error, he can't just say to himself, it doesn't matter what Mr. So-and-so believes. He must courageously and graciously say, no, my friend, that is not right.

[ 7 : 49 ] God's word on that point is different from your understanding. Now, the minister won't always be liked for speaking like that and that's why it requires courage. He's got to be prepared to be regularly not liked.

Then thirdly, the word must be preached patiently. Yes, Paul tells Timothy to reprove and rebuke and exhort but he doesn't say it's all right to do that in a bad-tempered or overbearing way.

He's to have patience according to verse 2. In fact, more than that, he is to have complete patience. However sharply he is provoked or attacked, he must never stamp his foot or raise his voice.

I have a good friend, he's been a friend of mine for many years, he's a very able and senior medical man and he once said to me, you know, I could never be a church leader because I simply haven't got sufficient patience.

I've often thought about that remark, I don't know whether it's connected to the fact that he has a shock of very bright red hair but this verse I think helps me to understand my friend's position better.

[ 8 : 53 ] The minister must preach the word with patience. And then fourth, the word must be preached carefully. In the New International version of the Bible, that final phrase of verse 2 is careful instruction.

So the preacher must resist the temptation to be slapdash or ill-prepared. Paul is telling Timothy that the instruction he gives must be properly thought through and well planned.

So half an hour's higgledy-piggledy thinking on a Saturday evening after a good dinner won't do. If the instruction is to be careful, it needs to be worked at. Worked at.

Do you remember how back in chapter 2 verse 15 Paul describes the minister as a worker. He's to be a man of the laboring class. He may not have big biceps, but if he's frightened of hard work, he will never preach the word carefully.

He's got to work up in here. Now let me ask those who come from other churches, which I know many of you do, think of your own minister for a moment. Is he preaching the word urgently, courageously, patiently, and carefully?

[10:02] If he is, then thank God for him, because he is a real blessing to your church. Support him and love him and encourage him in his work. But not all ministers do.

And sometimes a church member can help his or her minister. Let me give one or two practical suggestions. Does your minister have an annual book grant from the church to help him with his reading?

Two or three hundred pounds a year from the congregation would help him to buy several really good solid books which would encourage him in his Bible study and his preaching. Does your church encourage the minister to take a regular reading week in addition to his own holiday? Perhaps once a year, once every eighteen months so he can get away and get his mind around more material to stimulate his thought. Does your church pay for him to go to conferences for preachers?

Maybe once or twice a year to sharpen him up and to keep him keen to be a preacher. Two or three days away in the company of other preachers who really are committed to the task can be very stimulating and very encouraging.

[11:08] I think many congregations would gladly help their ministers in these practical ways once they've seen the need for it and have thought about these ways of helping the minister. And the consequence can be not only a minister who preaches better but also a minister who is personally encouraged by the loving concern of his congregation.

Alright, well turning now from the congregation and back to Timothy I want us to look at two great incentives that Paul gives Timothy in the first five verses of chapter four. And these are incentives to obey the command to preach and not to run away from it.

Now the first incentive is this widespread and deliberate deafness to the truth. Let me read these sobering verses three and four again.

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

Now Paul says there in verse three the time is coming and of course that time has long since arrived. The painful core of these verses is the fact that there are people who refuse to hear the truth.

[12:25] Paul says in verse three that they will not endure sound teaching and in verse four that they will turn away from listening to the truth. He doesn't quite say turn away in disgust but it's that kind of feeling the truth oh I don't want it.

Now let's remember sound teaching and the truth are synonyms for the gospel. This glorious revelation that it is possible to be saved and to be saved forever by Jesus.

Now why should people want to turn away from such a glorious revelation as the gospel? What in the world what in our planet could be so attractive so much more attractive than the gospel that people should turn to it rather than to the gospel?

Well Paul tells us just what it is this irresistibly attractive alternative. He tells us in the last three words of verse three their own passions.

That's the irresistible alternative. People will turn away from gospel preachers the preachers of the truth and they seek alternative teachers teachers who far from challenging their passions bend over backwards to accommodate themselves to their passions and then these folk are satisfied.

[13:40] They've rejected the truth and they've allowed their own passions their own desires to set the agenda for their lives. Now of course this can happen and this I think is partly Paul's point it can happen very much within the churches as well as outside the churches.

I can remember a particularly disquieting example of this. In the late 1990s I think it was 1998 or 1999 in response to increasing discipline over sexual morality in the churches of the western world a group of third world Christian leaders issued a fine document which they called the Kuala Lumpur Statement on Sexuality and in firm and clear terms that statement endorsed and upheld the

Bible's teaching on sexual morality.

Some of you will remember it and I'm sure have read it. Now that statement was a joy to read because while it shows loving pastoral concern towards people who've gone astray in matters of sex and that's very important it also upholds the Bible's teaching about sex and marriage unambiguously and calls for repentance where repentance is needed.

Now the church that I belonged to at that time in England got hold of some copies of this very good document and our church council which was our equivalent of the Kirk Session in the Church of Scotland the council unanimously endorsed this Kuala Lumpur statement.

We then took it to our deanery synod which is the next tier in church government in the Church of England and they too gave it a very strong endorsement.

[15:12] I don't think it was quite unanimous but I think something like 35 out of 36 said yes we must back this and they then asked the diocesan synod which is the next tier of church government up in the Church of England if they too would debate it and endorse it.

But the people responsible for setting the agenda for the diocesan synod meetings refused. They wrote back to us and said that they would not put this on the agenda despite the fact that the Anglican system required them to do so.

And the reason they gave for not including this was that this subject would be a potentially divisive issue. We knew that of course. Truth and error are going to divide people so that was no surprise to us.

But in order to placate us the diocese said that they would organise a day seminar on sexuality when these issues could be debated. In other words let's look at these things in a way that's not divisive and confrontational.

Well this seminar duly took place some time later. I went to it and a number of others from our church who were friends of the Kuala Lumpur statement went. There were four speakers at the day seminar and they'd been asked to present papers to the seminar and each of these speakers spoke for about 30 to 40 minutes.

[16:28] All four of the chosen speakers attacked, undermined or ridiculed the Bible's teaching on sexual morality. When we got towards the end of the day it must have been three or four in the afternoon very little time only five or ten minutes was allowed for debate and when I and other people tried to put the biblical view on these things we were treated as if we were embarrassing irrelevancies.

The time is coming says Paul when people will not endure sound teaching. Now when this sort of thing happens what are the Timothy's of this world the ministers to do?

Perhaps Timothy would have had every right to say well if that's the way people are going to behave I'm going to pack in preaching the word. If people are going to be so hostile to God's truth what is the point of going on proclaiming it?

And yet Paul says quite the opposite to him you'll see in verse 5 As for you in contradistinction to these folk I've just been talking about as for you always be sober minded endure suffering do the work of an evangelist fulfill your ministry.

Now let's notice these four rapid fire commandments that Paul gives Timothy in verse 5 First always be sober minded the good minister is not impulsive and headstrong and given to flailing about he needs to be a sober side steady and sane the church needs steady ministers in unsteady times.

[17:58] Second endure suffering when a Timothy keeps on and on preaching the truth he's bound to be opposed and being opposed is bound to be painful but Paul is saying don't run away from this pain Timothy if you preach the word you will be opposed but that's something you've got to learn to put up with as somebody has said it's the first 50 years that are the hardest for the preacher.

Then third do the work of an evangelist now how necessary that is people don't know the evangel the gospel so be an evangelist Timothy be a gospel proclaimer if people like you don't proclaim the gospel then the gospel won't get proclaimed and then fourth fulfill your ministry don't cut corners don't shirk challenges do everything you need to do and do it thoroughly so this widespread and deliberate deafness to the truth is a great incentive to Timothy to preach the word far from sending him into his shell this deafness should spur Timothy on to fresh effort the deafer people become the more persuasive our gospel proclamation needs to be Calvin wrote the more determined men become to despise the teaching of Christ the more zealous should godly ministers be to assert it now the second great incentive is the coming return of Jesus as judge and king let me read verse 1 and as I read it let me ask you if you can remain unmoved by it

I charge you I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and by his appearing and his kingdom preach the word isn't that one of the Bible's most stirring verses now why does the coming return of Jesus as judge and king give such weight to the commandment to preach the word Paul could have said something different at this point he could have said because people so need to understand the purpose and meaning of life preach the word now that would have been perfectly true because it is the word of God that teaches us the meaning and purpose of life but instead Paul fills Timothy's mind at this point with the thought of Jesus returning as judge and king now why is that when he returns as the judge in his kingly power it will be to rescue the repentant and to condemn the unrepentant there will be the great and final division so he will warmly welcome the repentant into his kingdom and they will be part of the new creation but to the unrepentant he will say depart from me

I never knew you and they will depart then not only to the grave but to the eternal ruination of hell Paul has been preaching the gospel for some 30 years he has seen thousands of people come to Christ transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's beloved son he's seen thousands rescued from a point where they were without God and without hope in the world and now having believed in Christ they are enjoying all the benefits of his death and resurrection but those who are lost will only be rescued if they hear and obey the gospel and they will never hear it unless the Timothys of this world preach it think of the day of judgment you sometimes imagine it it will finally confirm the choices that people have made if they've come to Christ then with Christ they will be forever but if they have chosen godlessness God will then on that great day confirm finally their choice to be without him so much is at stake so many lives only an inch or two of time remains in which the

Timothys of this world can preach the gospel they must preach it because the judge is coming the world is a it's a battle arena a battle between the forces of darkness and the power of the gospel and what is the battleground it is human souls the souls of men and women who are agnostics or atheists if anyone here today is still an atheist or an agnostic a battle is being waged for your soul the judge and king is coming how will you be able to meet him let me pass on some interesting Bible statistics baptism is mentioned 65 times in the New Testament the Lord's Supper only 3 or 4 times explicitly but the personal return of Jesus is spoken of 318 times in the New Testament and not as a matter of dry doctrine but as a powerful incentive once we grasp that the Lord Jesus is coming as judge and king preachers will preach the word and atheists will fall on their knees and beg Christ to have mercy upon them some of you will remember the ferry disaster back in the 1980s when there was a cross channel ferry called the Herald of

[ 23 : 19 ] Free Enterprise remember that name it founded in the harbour at Seebrugge and apparently there was a moment when another boat seeking to offer rescue came alongside the Herald of Free Enterprise to get passengers off the ferry which was going down and bring them to safety but there was a little gap it was only about 6 foot wide between the two boats a gap too wide for some of the older and weaker passengers to be able to jump across but it just so happened that there was a very tall man amongst the passengers I think he was about 6 foot 7 inches tall and this man lay down across that gap gripping on really hard with his hands on one side and his feet on the other and a number of people were able to walk across him to safety now the minister the preacher is rather like that man he provides the bridge by which people can cross from disaster to safety simply by explaining the gospel to them by preaching the word so the fact that

Jesus will return as king and judge is a great incentive to the Timothys of this world to stick to their task of preaching the life-giving word well friends to conclude let us pray then for our ministers who'd be a minister it's a wonderful thing a wonderful thing to be able to do to be a bridge between earth and heaven indeed between hell and heaven as we point people to the only saviour that there is so let's pray for our ministers that the Lord will day by day renew and increase their vigour their convictions their love for the Lord and their love for the lost let's ask the Lord to enable them to be steady and sober to be prepared for suffering and to keep preaching the word unashamedly boldly and penetratingly so that thousands of Scots who are without Christ today will come to him soon and let's also pray that the Lord will raise up quantities of new ministers for the generations to come who will be ready in season and out of season to preach the word let's bow our heads and we'll pray dear God our Father we want to thank you so much for this great second letter to Timothy and for this command that the Apostle Paul lays upon the heart and conscience of his friend Timothy and so we do pray for our ministers that you will make us bolder and more ready to work hard more

ready to take opportunities whenever they come to pass on the life-saving news the only life-saving news that there is in the world about the Lord Jesus and as we think of our country this land of Scotland we pray that in the generations to come because many more will be raised up as preachers many more will be saved and these things we ask in Jesus Christ's name  
Amen