

The Training of Christ's Servants

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[0 : 00] Amen. Well, let's take our Bibles and open them at Paul's first letter to Timothy. And our passage is chapter 4, the whole of chapter 4 I'll read today.

And you'll find that on page 992 if you have one of our visitors' Bibles, the big hardback Bibles, page 992. So 1 Timothy, chapter 4, beginning at the first verse.

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.

Through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared. Who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

For everything created by God is good. And nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving. For it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

[1 : 06] 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.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the savior 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.

[2 : 24] 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. Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may it be a blessing to us.

Well, as I say, we're continuing in our studies, our brief overview of some of the main themes of this first letter of Paul to Timothy. Timothy was responsible for overseeing the churches at Ephesus at this stage, probably somewhere around 58 or 60 AD.

One of his responsibilities is to appoint the right kind of people to be the overseers and the elders of the various churches or house churches in the Ephesus area. And I want to think today from this fourth chapter of the training of Christ's servant, which will take us particularly to verses 6 to 16 here.

I remember hearing the story, true story, of two elderly English ladies who were sharing a cup of tea together and discussing their respective grown-up children.

[3 : 38] Elderly ladies enjoy doing that kind of thing. Anyway, one of these ladies had a son, a grown-up son of about 50, who was a parish minister in London. So her friend said to her, tell me, Mildred, I've always wanted to know, what exactly does your son Richard do?

I know he's a minister, but how does he spend his day? Does he show people around his church? He must know a great deal about ecclesiastical architecture by now and stained glass, I imagine.

Well, it is an important question, isn't it? What does a minister do with his time? What is going on inside a minister's head from dawn to dusk? Well, as I say, we'll learn something about that as we look at this passage from verse 6 to verse 16, because this is one of the most instructive and fascinating passages anywhere in the Bible about the work of the Christian pastor or minister, the leader.

And this is not just a passage for ministers or for trainee ministers to read. It's very much a passage for all of us. All of us need to know about the life and priorities of the ministers who look after us in the churches, because we need to know what their agenda is and how we can encourage them and support them in their work.

Now, last week, we were looking at chapter 3, verses 1 to 7, which is about the qualities or the qualifications required in overseers or ministers, as they're called in chapter 3, verse 1.

[5 : 08] And it's interesting. I didn't really point this out last week, but it's interesting that all the qualities required in the overseer in chapter 3 are moral qualities, except for one, and that is the ability to teach.

Not that there's not a moral aspect to that, but it's more of a gift, isn't it? That's mentioned in chapter 3, verse 2, that he needs to be able to teach. That's, if you like, an intellectual gift.

But it's a very necessary quality or gift, because Paul has laid out his concerns very forcefully at the beginning of chapter 1, where his big concern, as he puts it to Timothy, is that he should stay there in Ephesus to command certain people not to teach false doctrine.

And therefore, Timothy needs to have quite a good mind, and the people who are going to be leaders of the churches need to have quite a good mind if they're in a position to command people not to speak false doctrine.

So if this false doctrine is to be effectively driven out of the churches and not allowed house room in the churches, Timothy, as a senior church leader, has got to appoint the right kind of people.

[6 : 16] If these ministers and leaders don't have the intellectual ability to distinguish the true from the false or the ability to teach the people the distinction between what is true and what is false, they won't be able to demolish false doctrine, and it will come in.

Now, Paul is not suggesting that they have to be university professors or PhDs, and we will know from our own experience that there are plenty really effective Bible teachers who haven't had much in the way of formal education.

But there still needs to be an ability to teach, because false doctrine, as much in the 21st century as in the first, is constantly snapping at the heels of sound doctrine.

So that's the scenario in 1 Timothy. Timothy must find able teachers for the churches, because the best way to drive out falsehood will always be to teach the truth.

Now, Paul knows that if a person is to be an effective minister over the long haul, over many years, a lot more is required than one single intellectual gift.

[7 : 20] And that's why he takes time and trouble here in chapter 4 to take Timothy rather further into the life of the minister. So let's look together at these verses and see how Paul is teaching Timothy, how to be a good servant of Christ Jesus, if I can pick up that phrase from verse 6.

So let's notice 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. Now, the false teachers who were creeping in clearly were preoccupied with what Paul calls irreverent silly myths, which no doubt were quite attractive to a certain kind of person.

Maybe they seemed spiritual and esoteric. But Paul dismisses these things as folly and nonsense. Have nothing to do, Timothy, with that kind of so-called spirituality.

Rather, train yourself for godliness. And he unpacks himself in the next verse. Verse 8. For while bodily training, physical 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.

[8 : 34] In other words, Timothy, you and your friends, you can go jogging in Bella Houston Park early in the morning if you really want to. And indeed, your waistline might be shrunk by one-sixteenth of an inch as a result of that.

There is some value in that kind of bodily training. But, says Paul, godliness is far more valuable because it's as much about the life of the world to come as it is about the present life.

The present life lasts only a few decades. But the life of the world to come is for eternity. So that is the life to train for. The training is not so much in physical fitness, but rather in godliness.

Now, let's notice from verse 7 who Timothy's trainer is to be. Is it to be some holiness guru? Is it to be Paul?

Is it to be the Lord? No, it is to be Timothy himself. Train yourself in godliness, says Paul. No doubt Paul had trained Timothy quite a lot in the past when the two men were working together as traveling missionaries.

[9 : 39] But Timothy is now older and Paul is no longer with him. So Timothy has to learn to become his own trainer. This means that the church leader has to look at his own life and get to know it as well as he can, with all its complexities and contradictions, with all its strengths and weaknesses.

And then he has to take responsibility for training that life in godliness. And he finds the raw material of his life is by no means grade one material.

It would be lovely if the raw material of every young minister's life was naturally godly, but it never is. I suppose a young minister, if he's well-dressed and he's got a decent haircut and so on, I suppose he can fool a doting great aunt for a short time.

And she might see him starting off work in his first church. And she says, what a nice young man he is. Goodness and kindness shine out of his every pore. John Newton, the hymn writer, knew just what sort of a young man he was.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a grade one specimen of humanity like me. No, a wretch. Wretch. And that fine minister, John Newton grew into a very fine and influential minister, he was not exaggerating when he called himself a wretch.

[11 : 00] I've been working with a number of friends here, like my friend Willie Phillip, and I see some of our young ministers sitting over here for some years now. And I've got to know them pretty well. But I can assure you that my friends and ministerial colleagues here at this church are grade one brigands and gangsters.

I know them well enough to be able to say that. And also the Bible tells me that that's what they're like. And of course it's equally true of me. Why did Paul have to tell Timothy to train himself in godliness?

Because he knew that Timothy was naturally ungodly. If goodness and sweetness had shone from Timothy's every pore, Paul would never have had to tell him to train himself in godliness.

It's because the minister is a sinful wretch like John Newton that he has to train himself to be godly. That's a lifetime's work. Now more specifically, how is he to do this?

Well, Paul outlines some of the main areas in verse 12, where he says to Timothy, Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example.

[12 : 05] Now here are the areas of training. In speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. When Paul talks of speech, I think he's not talking about oratory or preaching.

He's talking about Timothy's normal conversations with other people. If a minister's words are godly and gracious and stimulating and honoring to God, the believers in the church are built up and encouraged.

But if his words are spoiled by coarseness or outbursts of temper, the believers are dismayed and bewildered. Speech. Secondly, in conduct.

If a minister's life rings true to the standards of the gospel, other people in the fellowship will be spurred on to live with the same kind of integrity. But if other people say, with justification, there's something about that minister's life that doesn't ring true, then his influence for good is bound to be spoiled.

Then Paul mentions love. The minister is called on to be a very loving person. He's not some ivory tower figure who lives behind closed doors.

[13 : 18] He's called to love his brothers and sisters in the fellowship. And this will mean that he tries to draw as close to them as he possibly can, so as to know their hearts, to understand their joys and sorrows and their pains, so that he can encourage the good things in their hearts, but also be in a position lovingly to confront and challenge the things that are not so good.

Love. Then faith. Perhaps the minister's faith is most useful as an example to other Christians when it is most tested.

You all have known ministers who've been under great tests. Well, it's when you see some church leader undergoing a great test and continuing and persevering, loving people, preaching the gospel, going on with the work, even though badly tested, severely tested, then that is a great example to other Christians as well, to learn perseverance and joy in the midst of difficulty.

Purity is the last thing that Paul mentions here. I think I said this last week, but it's worth repeating. There are four main danger points which can defile the purity or the single-mindedness of a minister's life.

And those four things are sex, alcohol, money, and bad temper. We must pray for the purity of our ministers in those four areas particularly because we know that when a minister goes wrong at one of those points, it can do great damage to a congregation and it can take years for the congregation to recover from the damage that's done.

[14 : 56] So there's Paul's first word to Timothy. Train yourself, my brother. Train yourself for godliness. The minister needs to be in constant training. It's not as though you get trained at the age of 30 and then it's all done.

It's a constant lifelong thing because the sinful nature is always clamoring to get the upper hand. Now secondly, devote yourself.

You'll see that phrase comes twice in this passage. In verse 13 and again in verse 15. Devote yourself to these things.

So verse 13. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Now let's notice that verb, devote yourself.

It's a demanding thing. It requires attention and concentration and single-mindedness. Devote yourself. Don't dissipate your energies in a hundred different activities. Devote yourself to what?

[15 : 56] To the public reading of scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Now friends, we're really getting to the heart of the minister's work at this point. This is the thing that is to fill his vision and bend his every mental faculty into action.

This is what he's to think about at three o'clock in the morning when he wakes up. But it's the public reading of scripture, the exhortation, and the teaching. Not the stained glass windows and not the ecclesiastical architecture.

Now that phrase, the public reading of scripture, may seem to suggest elocution and beautiful diction and audibility and excellent pronunciation and that kind of thing. But that's not what Paul is concerned about.

Of course, when the Bible is read at public meetings, it needs to be read audibly and well. Otherwise, there's no point in reading it at all. But Paul is concerned with scripture being read immediately followed by the exhortation and the teaching, exhorting people to obey it and teaching the meaning.

Reading the Bible in public just by itself is only of limited value. It may speak to some people to hear the Bible read out. But how often have we heard a Bible passage read in public?

[17 : 09] I'd be the first to put my hand up in this category. How often have we read it and heard it read out? And it just sails past our ears and hardly touches base at all. Because our concentration can be elsewhere.

We're perhaps thinking about the Sunday roast or about the dentist or even the golf course or Wimbledon. So what we need is the reading of the Bible plus the exhortation and the teaching of the passage as well.

Well, it's the exhortation and teaching from the passage that makes us sit up and take notice. Teaching means drawing out its meaning, applying it to real life and heart and conscience.

And exhortation, I think, carries the idea of strong encouragement. If you like ramming the message home, rather as you take your palette knife and you push the polyfiller into the crack in the wall.

That's what exhortation does. It pushes it in and makes sure that the message gets home so that the preacher and the hearer alike feel the sharp edge of the word of God. Now, Paul says to his young friend, Timothy, you must devote yourself to these things.

[18 : 13] So if these things fill Timothy's vision, other things must take second place. So what might this mean? Well, sometimes or someday, a congregation member might want to get in touch with her minister.

So she gets on the phone to speak to him. Can I speak to John, please? No? Oh, I need to speak to him rather urgently, actually. We've got to work out the tea rota for the Tuesday evening fellowship.

And I do need to ask him about the sausages and baked apples for the young people for bonfire night. Did you say, not available at all today? What's he doing?

Preparing for Sunday? You mean choosing the hymns? No. Preparing the sermon? It's only Thursday, isn't it? Surely he can wait until Saturday at about 8 o'clock in the evening before he begins that little job, can't he?

Now, friends, you get the point, don't you? You get what I'm saying. That church member might have been a little bit frustrated not to be able to speak to the minister. But that church member should have jumped for joy to know that her minister was determined to take 1 Timothy 4.13 seriously.

[19 : 26] She should have thanked God for sending her church a minister who was serious about preparing for the Sunday preaching. Now, back to verse 15.

Practice these things. Devote yourself to them so that all may see your progress. Progress. When a minister devotes himself to these things, he will, over time, make progress.

He will become better at it. His teaching will become riper and more full of real biblical understanding. His Bible teaching will not become more soothing or more mellow necessarily.

It will become sharper and more stimulating and, for that reason, more deeply instructive and encouraging. It will wake people up and make them thrilled as they come to understand the Bible more fully.

So, Timothy is to train himself in godliness. He's to devote himself to the reading and the teaching and exhortation from Scripture. And thirdly, he is to watch himself.

[20 : 33] Train yourself. Devote yourself. Watch yourself. Look at verse 16 here. 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 very young child, a toddler, has to watch that toddler like a hawk, because the toddler is always threatening to get into scrapes and difficulties. And the minister, in the same way, has to watch himself, because he, too, is in constant danger.

I remember when I was a young boy and I began to go to church and I first had contact with Christian ministers, I used to think that somehow these ministers must live in a different hemisphere from the rest of people.

Because you had ordinary people and then you had ministers. And their world, it seemed to me, was a lovely, safe world of angels and organ music. A gentle, ordered, protected, golden life these ministers must lead, nourished by week tea and radio three and untouched by pain and difficulty.

Now, we all know that that's not the case. And I gradually woke up to that. Because the minister lives amidst the same trials and pressures that other people live with, he has to watch himself and his life closely.

[21 : 56] So he needs to be regularly keeping an eye on himself. There can be too much introspection, but there can be too little. He has to ask himself regularly, Self, are you praying?

Are you daily thankful to the Lord? Is your life becoming more thankful? Is your understanding of the Bible and of the gospel growing with the years? Are you reading?

Are you attending to the development of your mind? Are you battling with the world, the flesh and the devil? Or are you allowing their influence to creep into your life like fog into a barn?

Are you loving your wife and your children and developing your relationship with your wife more deeply? Are you loving your congregation? Are you longing for heaven? Are you taking evangelistic opportunities when they come?

Are you sitting loose, sitting lightly 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 questions, and many others as well, that a minister who is watching himself closely, keeping an eye on himself, is going to be regularly asking.

[23 : 04] But verse 16 tells Timothy that he must watch his teaching closely as well as his life. So is his teaching real instruction in full-blooded Bible Christianity?

Or is it just a few thoughts put together in odd moments of spare time? If the Bible, the whole Bible, drives and shapes the content of the minister's teaching, he is never going to run out of material.

He is never going to find himself scratching his head halfway through the week and saying despondently to his wife, I wonder what on earth I can say in the pulpit on Sunday. In fact, if he lived to be 300 years old, or 500, and if he had the combined brain power of August in Calvin and Einstein, he would never exhaust scripture.

The Bible is preachable. So let's preach it. Ministers who are not diligent Bible students may well be warm, loving human beings, 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, which could be quite interesting. But what a congregation needs in order to be prepared for life, and even more to be prepared for death, is the voice of God.

[24 : 30] And only the diligent Bible student will be able to convey that as he unfolds the Bible week by week. The Bible is God preaching to the world, and the minister enables the voice of God to be heard as he unpacks the Bible's message regularly.

That's the minister's, that's really his central task, to unpack the Bible week by week, and then the congregation grows strong. And what is the consequence of the minister watching himself and his teaching?

Paul tells us in the second half of verse 16, Persist in this, he says, 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 in Paul's dictionary means eternal safety in heaven.

The great goal of Paul's gospel is beyond 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.

[25 : 38] So a word like salvation in some churches can be interpreted in terms of becoming psychologically sound and emotionally more mature, so that life on earth, this life on earth, 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 New Testament is on the eternal consequences of the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

The problem faced and dealt with by the New Testament gospel is not the problem of how little me can become happy and emotionally secure.

It's 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 rather from what Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 1 as the wrath to come.

So this is why the minister needs to watch his life and his teaching so closely. The eternal safety of many people hangs on his life and teaching, humanly speaking.

[26 : 56] If he persists in guarding his life carefully and his teaching, he and many others will be saved in the end. So friends, let's continue to pray for our ministers and leaders.

Those who are ministers are frail creatures. It's so possible for a minister to grow despondent or to fall into sin or to lose the plot as far as the Bible is concerned and to stop teaching the message of scripture.

But Timothy is not to be like that. He's to train himself in godliness. He's to devote himself to the reading and teaching of scripture and he is to watch himself and his teaching closely.

And if he and his many successors are willing to do this, our churches will be greatly revived and strengthened. And in the words of verse 16, there will be salvation, both for the teacher and for those he teaches.

Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, we do want to thank you and bless your name for those who have taught us the Bible over the years.

[28 : 09] We think of those many faithful preachers and teachers who week by week have unfolded the message of scripture. And we think of the way in which the congregations grow strong when this happens.

So we do pray for our own ministers and leaders, both in this church and other churches represented here, that you will help us to follow this pattern that Paul lays out for Timothy and for so many others in later generations.

And we pray that you will help us also, dear Father, to identify and train and put forward fine young people to enter this work as well so that there may be a continuing succession of people whose lives conform to this great biblical pattern.

So we thank you, dear Father. We do pray that you'll encourage us today and help us gladly to fly the flag for Christ, to be unashamed of him, and to share the gospel wherever we can.

And we ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.