

1 Timothy 4

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As we all know, change is a constant part of human existence. We live in a world today that is unimaginably different from the one that the older brethren here knew 50 years ago. To some extent, this change is something to which we must adapt. Five years ago, none of us had ever heard of Facebook; today, it's the single best way to find out what our brethren here and in other places are up to. It's a tool we can use to carry out God's will.

However, not all change and adaptation is so beneficial. The world around us would have us change not merely the tools our faith uses, but the elements of that faith itself. We can find all sorts of persuasive voices urging us to adopt a belief in theistic evolution, a loosening of the rules on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, and even a reinterpretation of the entirety of Scripture. Some people think it's just as beneficial and harmless to adopt these changes as to start using Facebook. The argument goes that if we don't, we'll be left in the dust of the world's progress, forever irrelevant.

This, of course, is not a new problem. When we look at Paul's first letter to Timothy, we see that Timothy also was about to get buffeted by the winds of change. All sorts of new teachers were going to arise, teaching all sorts of strange things, and Paul wanted Timothy to be prepared for these developments so that he could deal with them.

However, Paul's prescription for change was not to embrace every new doctrinal variation that came along. Instead, he urged Timothy to embrace the truth of God's word. By returning to the beginning, by focusing on the essentials of faith and sound doctrine, Timothy could stand against the tide of falsehood and defend the church from apostasy. When we are confronted with similar changes today, we must do the same. Paul's words here both equip us in principle and give us insight into how to overcome our problems today. Let's look at how this works in 1 Timothy 4.

God's Blessings.

This chapter opens with a discussion of what our attitude should be toward God's blessings. We see this in its first context, 1 Timothy 4:1-5. Paul's words here make it plain that he's not randomly bringing this subject up. Instead, he is addressing a false teaching that the Holy Spirit has predicted. This teaching is no laughing matter. It's going to cause souls to be lost, and it is going to be driven by deceitful spirits and demonic teachings. Worse still, the people who teach it are going to be conscious of their own falsehood. They're going to know that they're leading people to destruction, but they won't care. Their consciences are going to be so scarred that what would horrify us wouldn't faze them.

This teaching is going to revolve around two main elements: forbidding to marry and abstaining from foods. When we consider the history of the early church, it's evident that Paul was predicting the rise of Gnosticism. Gnostics were all over the map doctrinally, but a substantial number of them did advocate celibacy and not eating certain foods. The idea was that this kind of physical deprivation made them holier. Instead, it had the opposite effect.

Strangely enough, even though this kind of teaching is so clearly condemned in Scripture, there are many religious groups that teach just the same thing today. We can all think of churches that believe and teach that if you vow not to get married, it somehow makes you holier. Likewise, it seems like every church in town has got something on its marquee out front talking about observing Lent, and, as we all know, one of the main ways Lent is kept is by giving up some kind of food for the 40 days until Easter. Let me confess, brethren—from a common-sense perspective, I have never understood Lent. If God doesn't want me doing something, why would He be OK with me giving it up for 40 days, but practicing it for 325 days? On the other hand, if He doesn't care whether I do it or not, why would my giving it up impress Him? Sadly, the problem here doesn't stop with the outcry of common sense. Paul clearly tells us that both celibacy and abstaining from foods are demonic doctrines that will cause our souls to be lost if we practice them religiously. The truth of the word is eternal, so we can be sure today that these things put those who practice them in terrible spiritual peril.

The last part of this context defines the attitude that we should have. God is good, and He has filled even this life with good things for us to enjoy. Marriage isn't from the devil. It's from God, and God made marriage to give us pleasure and joy. Likewise, it wasn't the devil who made food taste good. It was God. He didn't have to do that, but He wanted to, so that our meals are not just a source of nourishment, but a source of enjoyment. When we savor these good things that He has given us, and we thank Him for His blessing, we glorify Him. Certainly, we can misuse His blessings through sins like immorality and gluttony, but when we use them in the way God intended, He is pleased.

Our Focus.

From there, Paul shifts quite naturally to defining what Timothy's focus, and indeed what our focus, should be. Look with me at 1 Timothy 4:6-10. First of all, notice that the first verse here establishes a logical sequence. This sequence begins with what Timothy has learned. He's been taught with good doctrine and with the words of faith. That

sound teaching has had its intended effect. It nourished Timothy, so that he was able to follow it. From there, Timothy's service logically extends to teaching others the truth. If he does that, he will be a good servant of Jesus.

This same logical pattern should be apparent in our lives. When we first start out as Christians, we aren't really capable of much. However, the word feeds us to the point where we put the Scripture into practice. Once we're involved in both knowing and doing, the next step is to teach others. Only then, when we know and grow and do and teach, have we reached the point where we are mature and useful in the kingdom. Notice also that, just as is true here, sometimes teaching God's word will be controversial. The Gnostics would not have been happy to have Timothy tell them that their asceticism was endangering their souls. However, if we want to be good servants, teaching is what we must do.

This level of spiritual maturity is not something that comes without effort. Instead, just as Paul warns Timothy here, we have to exercise ourselves to the purpose of godliness if we want to get there. Just like a professional athlete has to eat right if he wants his body to perform at the maximum possible level, we have to eat right. We have to feed ourselves on the word, instead of on profane myths and old wives' tales. There's a lot of spiritual junk food out there, but if we get our nourishment from the Scripture, that will make us what we need to be. Likewise, even though exercising our bodies has some value, so we ought to get up and go to the gym even if we don't feel like it, what's really important is for us to get our souls in shape. No matter how carefully I maintain my body, sooner or later, I'm going to lose it. However, the effort that I put into my spirit will never be wasted, because it earns for me an eternal reward.

Paul says, in fact, that the reward of godliness is so great that it's not just worth working for. It's worth suffering reproach for. The Scripture tells us just how great the reproaches that Paul suffered were. When we consider the cumulative effect of stonings, beatings, shipwrecks, hunger, and just out-and-out stress, it's likely that Paul wrecked his physical body for the sake of his soul. He didn't do that because he was a dumb guy. As the Scripture makes clear, Paul was quite obviously brilliant. Instead, he suffered what he did because the reward waiting for him was worth it.

Ultimately, though, Paul's salvation didn't depend on the merit of his godliness, and ours doesn't either. Paul went through what he did because God asked him to, and he had fixed his hope on God. Anyone can do this. As Paul says, Jesus is the Savior for everyone, at least in potential. However, those who believe and act on their belief can be assured of receiving their salvation from Him. We are expected to work, but we still depend on the grace of Jesus Christ.

Our Dedication.

Next, Paul gets into the specifics of godliness, the things that Timothy had to dedicate himself to, and the things that we have to dedicate ourselves to. These specifics appear in 1 Timothy 4:11-16. First, because Timothy was a young man, he had to guard against those who would refuse to hear him because of his youth. The best way for Timothy to win over his doubters was with the force of his example. It was his responsibility to live in such a righteous way that he could gain the moral authority he needed to preach. Similarly, we may well have people in our lives today who will not hear us, whether because of our youth, our relationship with them, or some other attribute. We need to deal with them in the same way. We need to prove with our lives that God and His love dwell within us. Then, people will listen.

Likewise, Paul wanted to see Timothy devote himself to the word. We've talked about this already, but it bears repeating. Perhaps this points to some spiritual blind spot in me, but the longer I preach, the more I appreciate the Bible. Over and over again, I see it change hearts and save souls and cause growth in ways that I could never do with my own wisdom. The more we turn to the Scripture, the more we put that amazing spiritual power to work within us.

Third, Paul asks Timothy to be careful not to neglect the spiritual gift that he had. We don't know very much about this gift, but it most likely came to him at the hands of the apostolic elders in Jerusalem when he visited with Paul. We don't know what it did, but we do know that Paul wanted Timothy to use it. We don't have the same kind of miraculous gifts today, but we all still possess spiritual gifts from God. Some of us are gifted leaders. Others are skilled teachers. Still others are good at extending God's mercy to others. Every one of us has a unique package of talents and skills. Whatever those skills are, though, we can be certain that God wants us to use them for His glory. Let's not allow our gifts to dwindle to ashes. Let's make every effort to kindle them and put them to work in the church.

Fourth, Paul wants to see Timothy give himself entirely to doing God's will. This process of total devotion began with meditation, but it was supposed to end with spiritual progress that everyone in the church and outside of it could see. This is something that our spiritual lives must include too. It's not enough for us to be holding on. We have to be growing, and growing so rapidly that even the outsiders in our lives notice the change in us. Is this how we're living? Would the people around us say that we're better people now than we were a year ago? Or are we just trying to coast into heaven? God's not content with our complacency, brethren. He expects us to improve constantly in our service to Him.

Finally, Paul urges Timothy toward perseverance. It wasn't enough for him to get all of these things going at once and then slack off on them two weeks later. He had to continue in them. He had to be at 100 percent spiritual productivity until the end of his life. The same is true for us. There is no rest for the Christian until heaven, and we'd best remember it. However, if we live this way, we will claim that rest, and we will take a lot of others with us too.