

1 Timothy 4:11-16

M. W. Bassford, 5-1-11

My father-in-law likes to joke with me that I have the easiest job in the world. After all, he says, preachers only work one day a week, and on that one day, they have this great big book to tell them what to say. Even though I typically work six days a week instead of one day, and even though he speaks only in jest, there's still an element of truth to what he says. In many areas of life, we value originality highly. We speak well of those who come up with something new, who think outside the box. Although new and different thoughts have their place, that place is not in the pulpit. My job as a preacher is not to feed the Athenian appetite that wants to hear some new thing. Instead, my work is to say only old things, to repeat the message of the same inspired word that God revealed to His people thousands of years ago.

This means that I have no scruples whatsoever about taking a passage of Scripture, and without changing anything about its meaning, using it for the outline of a sermon. In fact, I believe that any such sermon outline is superior to any outline that I might come up with myself, and I'm always eager to find passages that I can use to do that. I noticed such a passage as we were studying through 1 Timothy on Sunday nights last year. Because I did so on a chapter-by-chapter basis, I didn't have the opportunity to examine this particular text as fully as I might have liked, so I resolved that after the memory of that sermon series had died down a little bit, I was going to come back and preach on the text again.

We find this particular text in 1 Timothy 4:11-16. As with everything in the epistles of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus, Paul is specifically directing this advice to a young preacher who needs to know how to behave. However, there's something here for all of us. Let's devote the next half hour, then, to a study of 1 Timothy 4:11-16.

1 Timothy 4:11-14

Within this ready-made sermon outline, Paul's first piece of advice is to **COMMAND AND TEACH THESE THINGS**. Throughout his letters to Timothy, Paul repeatedly warns his young associate against the dangers of apostasy, but the warning is never clearer than here. There are all kinds of demonic doctrines and myths and fables that are going to arise, but Timothy must not make any room in his preaching for those new ideas. Instead, he must only teach "these things", the things that Paul had already taught him, the inspired revelation of the gospel of Christ.

Today, "these things" are the things that we must also command and teach. If the religious world of Timothy's day was filled with false doctrines and invitations to apostasy, our religious world is even more so. There are countless books written by countless authors that will tell us how we can get to heaven if only we listen to them instead of the Bible. However, only the word of God can make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every other path, no matter how inviting it looks, will lead only to a dead end, and I do mean dead. We must remember this, even as we consult commentaries and other works written by wise and godly men. Only the Scripture can reveal the truth.

Next, Paul tells Timothy that he is to **LET NO ONE DESPISE HIS YOUTH**. This was going to be a problem for Timothy, just as it is for any young preacher. If some of Timothy's hearers in Ephesus didn't like his message, they were going to use the messenger as an excuse to dismiss it. They were going to say things like, "Oh, Timothy's too young. What does he know about anything?" Timothy could not allow that to happen. He was young, it was true, but his message came from a God as old as eternity. No one had the right to dismiss it.

Today, friends, we can run into the same basic problem, even if we aren't young anymore. Those who oppose the gospel will always prefer to debate the speaker rather than the position. It might be that they tell us we're too old to understand how things are in the modern world. It might be that they talk down to us because we're female. It might be that they won't hear us because they're a close relative, and they remember changing our diapers. Whatever our position, we must keep the focus on God's word. If we're teaching the truth, our hearers need to respect it as divine.

As an important part of gaining the respect of others, Timothy had to **BE AN EXAMPLE**. Those who didn't want to hear his teaching were going to be looking for a reason to ignore it, and if Timothy let himself lapse into ungodly conduct, his sinful behavior would give his enemies that reason. Instead, he had to be righteous in everything, from what he did to what he said to what he believed. That way, his behavior would teach others instead of discrediting him.

Our example is just as vital, particularly when we're dealing with those outside of Christ. Countless people refuse to obey the gospel on the grounds that the church is full of hypocrites. Logical problems aside, though, the best answer we can make to people like that is to prove with our lives that even though there are hypocrites out there, we aren't among them. The more we talk about our faith, the more we're going to be on trial for it. People are going to be watching everything we do, looking for an excuse to discredit what we say. We can't give them that excuse. We must honor God's word not just with what we say, but with what we do.

In a more formal religious context, Timothy was to **GIVE ATTENTION TO READING**. This doesn't mean that Paul wanted to see Timothy curling up by the fire with a good book. Instead, here, as elsewhere in the Bible, "the

reading” refers to the formal reading of Scripture that was a part of Jewish and then Christian worship services. From this, we can also draw the conclusion that the exhortation and doctrine that Paul mentions next also refer to the practices of the public assembly of the church in Ephesus. Timothy had to be devoted to that public worship.

This same devotion is just as important to us. Even while we recognize that discipleship is about our daily walk with God, we must not forget that that walk with God begins here. The assembly of the Lord’s people is a valuable and precious thing. This is where we have a priceless opportunity three times a week to learn God’s word. We must be devoted to coming here and hearing that word. A lot of Christians think of the assemblies as optional, particularly on Sunday night and Wednesday night. Let’s be honest, friends. Does that sound like being devoted to the reading, like giving it our full attention? If we want to be obedient to God’s word, we will be here every single time we can be.

Paul also tells Timothy, **“DO NOT NEGLECT YOUR GIFT”**. Apparently, when Timothy had accompanied Paul to Jerusalem at the end of the third missionary journey, he had come before the apostolic elders of the Jerusalem church, and they had laid hands on him to impart some miraculous spiritual gift. We don’t know what that gift was, but we do know that Timothy wasn’t employing it as fully as he should have been. He needed to change that.

Even though none of us today have the power to prophesy or speak in tongues, we still have gifts from God. Every one of us possesses inborn abilities and talents that are useful in the kingdom. Not surprisingly, God wants to see us using those things. If we have the ability to lead singing, we should do that. If we have some measure of skill in teaching, we should be using that in Bible classes. If we have a warm, compassionate heart, we need to be involved in caring for the sick and the shut-ins. No matter who we are, no matter what our time of life is, there is some useful work that we can be doing in the kingdom. It’s our responsibility to find that work and to carry it out.

1 Timothy 4:15-16

In addition, Timothy was to **PRACTICE THESE THINGS**. It wasn’t enough for him to faithfully repeat from the pulpit what Paul had taught him. Instead, he had to incorporate those things into his daily mode of life. The gospel wasn’t just something to be taught. It was something to be lived, consistently and on a daily basis.

This consistent commitment to godly living must be evident in our lives too. Spiritually speaking, we can divide the world into two main groups. There are those who make a practice of righteousness and sin sometimes, and then there are those who make a practice of sin, and are righteous sometimes. If we are true disciples of Jesus, we will be in the first group, never the second. God’s word has to be the code by which we live our lives, so that those lives glorify Him.

Paul then makes clear what the intensity of Timothy’s practice has to be by telling him to **GIVE HIMSELF ENTIRELY TO THEM**. In the English language, “practice” carries with it two main meanings. “Practice” can mean our habitual behavior, or it can mean the time we put in perfecting some skill so that we can improve. Paul’s point is that Timothy needs to be doing both of those things. He doesn’t just need to be living like a Christian. He needs to be improving his skill at discipleship, and improving it so steadily that everyone who sees him can tell he’s getting better.

We too need to be putting in this spiritual practice time and showing this spiritual improvement. Sportswriters sometimes talk of the Rule of 10,000, the idea that in order to completely master some skill, you have to have practiced it 10,000 times. The reason why Michael Jordan had such a deadly jump shot was because he had shot the ball 10,000 times before from every possible position on the court. Practice and improvement are just as connected in our spiritual lives. If we want to get better at resisting temptation, we have to practice. If we want to get better at teaching the gospel to others, we have to practice. Indeed, we have the obligation to practice, so that we conspicuously grow more like Jesus.

It was just as important for Timothy to **TAKE HEED TO HIMSELF**. In other words, he had to watch himself, pay attention to the direction he was headed spiritually. Even with the best of intentions, it was possible for him to drift spiritually so that he began to serve the devil instead of the Lord. The only way for him to arrest that drift was through constant vigilance, constant evaluation of himself against the word, and making the changes required.

We must also embrace this level of vigilance. God doesn’t expect us to be faithful for five years, or even for 50 years. He requires us to be faithful until death, and if we fall away at the end of a life of service, our previous good works will do us no good at all. We never arrive at a place where we’re immune to the wiles of Satan. Instead, we must always use the word to calibrate our lives, to make sure that we are walking according to the same standard of righteousness.

Finally, Timothy had to **CONTINUE** in all of these righteous behaviors. Paul didn’t need him to be a fireball for the Lord for a week or two after 1 Timothy reached Ephesus, and then sputter out. Instead, he wanted Timothy’s zeal to be a steady flame for the Lord, that would burn constantly to light the way to salvation.

As I’ve said many times before, persistence is one of the most underrated Christian virtues, but it is also one of the most important. Without persistence, we cannot possibly succeed as disciples of Christ. Jesus wasn’t a flash-in-the-pan kind of guy. Instead, His whole career was marked by determination and discipline. He set His face toward the cross and never swerved aside. In our walk with God, we need to be that committed. We don’t just need to start doing good things. We need to keep doing them. That’s the perseverance that will enable us to lay hold of eternal life.