

How to Be a Man of God (1 Timothy 4)

If you were to write a job description for your pastor, what would it contain? How would it compare with the description he might write? A pastor preaches regularly, performs weddings and other Christian services, visits the sick, and counsels the distressed. But what is his ministry, and what kind of person must he be to fulfill his God-given ministry?

In this section of his letter to Timothy, Paul emphasized the character and the work of the minister himself; and he listed three qualities that a minister must possess if he is to be successful in serving God.

1. A Good Minister, Preaching the Word (4:1–6)

Paul had warned the Ephesian elders that false teachers would invade the church (Acts 20:28–31), and now they had arrived. The Holy Spirit had spoken in specific terms about these teachers, and the prophecy was starting to be fulfilled in Paul's time. Certainly it is fulfilled in our own time! We can recognize false teachers by the description Paul gave in this paragraph.

They are energized by Satan (v. 1a). This is the only place where demons are mentioned in the Pastoral Epistles. Just as there is a "mystery of godliness" concerning Christ (1 Tim. 3:16), so there is a "mystery of iniquity" that surrounds Satan and his work (2 Thess. 2:7). Satan is an imitator (2 Cor. 11:13–15); he has his own ministers and doctrines, and seeks to deceive God's people and lead them astray (2 Cor. 11:3). The first test of any religious doctrine is what it says about Jesus Christ (1 John 4:1–6).

It comes as a shock to some people that Satan uses professed Christians in the church to accomplish his work. But Satan once used Peter to try to lead Jesus on a wrong path (Matt. 16:21–23), and he used Ananias and Sapphira to try to deceive the church at Jerusalem (Acts 5). Paul warned that false teachers would arise from within the church (Acts 20:30).

They lead people astray (v. 1b). Their goal is to seduce people and get them to depart from the faith. This is the word apostasy, and it is defined as "a willful turning away from the truth of the Christian faith." These false teachers do not try to build up the

church or relate people to the Lord Jesus Christ in a deeper way. Instead, they want to get disciples to follow them and join their groups and promote their programs. This is one difference between a true church and a religious cult: A true church seeks to win converts to Jesus Christ and to build them spiritually; conversely, a cult proselytizes, steals converts from others, and makes them servants (even slaves!) of the leaders of the cult. However, not all apostates are in cults; some of them are in churches and pulpits, teaching false doctrine and leading people astray.

They are hypocrites (v. 2). "Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:15–20). These false teachers preach one thing but practice another. They tell their disciples what to do, but they do not do it themselves. Satan works "by means of the hypocrisy of liars" (1 Tim. 4:2, literal translation). One of the marks of a true servant of God is his honesty and integrity: He practices what he preaches. This does not mean he is sinlessly perfect, but that he sincerely seeks to obey the Word of God. He tries to maintain a good conscience (see 1 Tim. 1:5, 19; 3:9).

The word seared means "cauterized." Just as a person's flesh can be "branded" so that it becomes hard and without feeling, so a person's conscience can be deadened. Whenever we affirm with our lips something that we deny with our lives (whether people know it or not), we deaden our consciences just a little more. Jesus made it clear that it is not religious talk or even performing miracles that qualifies a person for heaven, but doing God's will in everyday life (Matt. 7:21–29).

An apostate is not just wrong doctrinally; he is wrong morally. His personal life became wrong before his doctrines were changed. In fact, it is likely that he changed his teachings so that he could continue his sinful living and pacify his conscience. Believing and behaving always go together.

They deny God's Word (vv. 3–5). The false teachers in Ephesus combined Jewish legalism with Eastern asceticism. You find Paul dealing with this same false doctrine in his Letter to the Colossians (Col. 2:8–23 especially). For one thing, the false teachers taught that an unmarried life was more spiritual than a married life, which is contrary to Scripture. "It is not good that the man should be alone" are God's own words (Gen. 2:18). Jesus put His seal of approval on marriage (Matt. 19:1–9), though He pointed out that not everybody is supposed to marry (Matt. 19:10–12). Paul also affirmed the biblical basis for marriage (1 Cor. 7:1–

24), teaching that each person should follow the will of God in the matter.

Beware of any religious teaching that tampers with God's institution of marriage. And beware of any teaching that tampers with God's creation. The false teachers who were infecting the Ephesian church taught that certain foods were taboo; if you ate them, you were not spiritual. The fact that God called His own creation "good" (Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25) did not interest these teachers. Their authority to dictate diets gave them power over their converts.

Those who "believe and know the truth" are not impressed with the dos and don'ts of the legalists. Jesus stated that all foods are clean (Mark 7:14–23). He taught this lesson again to Peter (Acts 10) and reaffirmed it through Paul (1 Cor. 10:23–33). A person may not be able to eat certain foods for physical reasons (an allergy, for example), but no food is to be rejected for spiritual reasons. We should not, however, use our freedom to eat and drink to destroy weaker Christians (Rom. 14:13–23). The food we eat is sanctified (set apart, devoted to God) when we pray and give thanks; so the Word of God and prayer turn even an ordinary meal into a spiritual service for God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31).

The emphasis in a minister's life should be on "the Word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:5). It is tragic when a church keeps its pastors so busy with menial tasks that they have hardly any time for God's Word and prayer (Acts 6:1–7). Paul reminded young Timothy of his great responsibility to study, teach, and preach the Scriptures, and to spend time in prayer. As a "good minister" he must be "nourished up in the words of faith" (1 Tim. 4:6). Timothy had certain responsibilities in the light of this growing apostasy:

Teach the church the truth (v. 6a). God's people need to be warned about false doctrine and religious apostasy. A minister must not major on these subjects, because he is obligated to teach "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), but neither should he ignore them. As we travel the streets and highways, we see two kinds of signs: those that tell us where we are going ("Boston 45 miles") and those that warn us of possible dangers ("Bridge Out!"). A pastor must teach positive doctrine so that people will know what they believe and where they are going. But he must also expose false doctrine so that people will not be seduced and led astray.

He must nourish himself in the Word (v. 6b). Of course, every Christian ought to feed daily on the Word (Jer. 15:16; Matt. 4:4; 1 Peter 2:2), but it is especially important that a pastor grow in the Word. It is by daily studying the "good doctrine" and meditating on the Word that he grows in the Lord and is able to lead the church.

The "good minister" preaches the Word that he himself feeds on day by day. But it is not enough to preach the Word; he must also practice it.

2. A Godly Minister, Practicing the Word (4:7–12)

Paul shifted to an athletic illustration at this point in his letter. Just as a Greek or Roman athlete had to refuse certain things, eat the right food, and do the right exercises, so a Christian should practice "spiritual exercise." If a Christian puts as much energy and discipline into his spiritual life as an athlete does into his game, the Christian grows faster and accomplishes much more for God. Paul discussed in this section three levels of life.

The bad—"profane and old wives' fables" (v. 7a). These are, of course, the false teachings and traditions of the apostates. These doctrines have no basis in Scripture; in fact, they contradict the Word of God. They are the kind of teachings that silly people would discuss, not dedicated men and women of the Word! No doubt these teachings involved the false doctrines just named (1 Tim. 4:2–3). Paul also warned Titus about "Jewish fables" (Titus 1:14). Paul warned Timothy about these same "fables" in his second letter (2 Tim. 4:4).

A believer cannot rediscover new doctrines. Paul admonished Timothy to remain true to "the good doctrine which you have closely followed up to now" (1 Tim. 4:6b, literal translation). He warned him not to "give heed to fables and endless genealogies" (1 Tim. 1:4). While a pastor must know what the enemy is teaching, he must not be influenced by it. A chemist may handle and study poisons, but he does not permit them to get into his system.

The temporary—"bodily exercise" (vv. 7–8). Again, this is an athletic image. Certainly we ought to care for our bodies, and exercise is a part of that care. Our bodies are God's temples, to be used for His glory (1 Cor. 6:19–20), and His tools for His service (Rom. 12:1–2). But bodily exercise benefits us only during this life; godly exercise is profitable now and for eternity. Paul did not ask Timothy to choose

between the two; I think God expects us to practice both. A healthy body can be used of God, but we must major on holiness.

The eternal—"godliness" (vv. 7–12). Phillips Brooks said, "The great purpose of life—the shaping of character by truth." Godly character and conduct are far more important than golf trophies or home-run records, though it is possible for a person to have both. Paul challenged Timothy to be as devoted to godliness as an athlete is to his sport. We are living and laboring for eternity.

Paul used two similar athletic images in writing to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 9:24–27), emphasizing the disciplines necessary for godly living. As an athlete must control his body and obey the rules, so a Christian must make his body his servant and not his master. When I see high school football squads and baseball teams going through their calisthenics under the hot summer sun, I am reminded that there are spiritual exercises that I ought to be doing (Heb. 5:14). Prayer, meditation, self-examination, fellowship, service, sacrifice, submission to the will of others, witness—all of these can assist me, through the Spirit, to become a more godly person.

Spiritual exercise is not easy; we must "labor and suffer reproach" (1 Tim. 4:10a). "For this we labor and strive" (NIV). The word translated "strive" is an athletic word from which we get our English word agonize. It is the picture of an athlete straining and giving his best to win. A Christian who wants to excel must really work at it, by the grace of God and to the glory of God.

But exercising ourselves in godly living is not only profitable for us; it is also profitable for others (1 Tim. 4:11–12). It enables us to be good examples, so that we encourage others. Paul named several areas of life in which you and I should be examples.

"In word" (1 Tim. 4:12) implies that our speech should always be honest and loving, "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

"In conduct" (the KJV's "conversation" means "walk," not "talk") suggests that our lives are to be controlled by the Word of God. We must not be like the hypocrites Paul described to Titus (Titus 1:16): "They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him."

"In love" (charity) points to the motivation of our lives. We do not obey God to be applauded by

men (Matt. 6:1ff.), but because we love God and love God's people.

("In spirit" is not in many manuscripts, but it would describe the inner enthusiasm and excitement of a child of God.)

"In faith" implies that we trust God and are faithful to Him. Faith and love often go together (1 Tim. 1:14; 2:15; 6:11; 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:22). Faith always leads to faithfulness.

"In purity" is important as we live in this present evil world. Ephesus was a center for sexual impurity, and the young man Timothy was faced with temptations. He must have a chaste relationship to the women in the church (1 Tim. 5:2) and keep himself pure in mind, heart, and body.

But godly living not only helps us and other believers; it also has its influence on the lost. Paul reminded Pastor Timothy that Jesus Christ is the Savior (1 Tim. 4:10), and it is the believer's task to share that good news with the lost. In effect he wrote, "We Christians have fixed our hope in the living God, but the lost have no hope and do not know the living God. All that many of them know are the dead idols that can never save them."

The title "Saviour of all men" does not imply that everybody will be saved (universalism), or that God saves people in spite of themselves; for Paul added "specially of those that believe." It is faith that saves one's soul (Eph. 2:8–10). Since God "will have all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4), and since Christ "gave Himself a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:6), then any lost sinner can trust Christ and be saved. Christ is "the Saviour of all men," so nobody need despair.

Timothy should not fear to practice the Word of God and apply it to the life of the church, for this Word is "a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance" (1 Tim. 4:9). These faithful sayings made up a summary of truth for the early church (see 1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8). The fact that Timothy was a young man (the word then applied to a person from youth to forty) should not deter him from practicing the Word. In fact, he was to "command" these things, and this is our military word "charge" (1 Tim. 1:3). The local church is a unit in God's spiritual army, and its leaders are to pass God's orders along to the people with authority and conviction.

3. A Growing Minister, Progressing in the Word (4:13–16)

The key thought in this section is “that thy profiting may appear to all” (1 Tim. 4:15). The word profiting (“progress” NIV) is a Greek military term; it means “pioneer advance.” It describes the soldiers who go ahead of the troops, clear away the obstacles, and make it possible for others to follow. As a godly pastor, Timothy was to grow spiritually so that the whole church could see his spiritual progress and imitate it.

No pastor can lead his people where he has not been himself. “Such as I have, give I thee” is a basic principle of life and ministry (Acts 3:6). The pastor (or church member) who is not growing is actually going backward, for it is impossible to stand still in the Christian life. In his living, teaching, preaching, and leading, the minister must give evidence of spiritual growth. But what are factors that make spiritual progress possible?

Emphasize God’s Word (v. 13). “Give attendance to” means “devote yourself to, be absorbed in.” Ministering the Word was not something Timothy was to do after he had done other things; it was to be the most important thing he did. Reading means the public reading of Scripture in the local assembly. The Jewish people always had the reading of the law and the Prophets in their synagogues, and this practice carried over into Christian churches. Jesus read the Scriptures in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16ff.), and Paul often read the lessons when he visited a synagogue (Acts 13:15).

In my itinerant ministry, I have noted that many churches have dispensed with the public reading of God’s Word, and I am disappointed. They have time for “special music” and endless announcements, but there is no time for the reading of the Bible. The pastor may read a text before he preaches, but that is a different thing. Every local church ought to have a schedule of Bible readings for the public services. It is commanded by Scripture that we read God’s Word in the public assemblies. (I might add that those who read the Word publicly ought to prepare themselves privately. Nobody should be asked “at the last minute” to read the Scriptures publicly. The Bible deserves the best we can give.)

Exhortation (1 Tim. 4:13) literally means “encouragement” and suggests the applying of the Word to the lives of the people. The pastor was to

read the Word, explain it, and apply it. Doctrine means “teaching,” and is a major emphasis in the pastoral letters. There are at least twenty-two references to “teaching” or “doctrine” in these thirteen chapters.

“Apt to teach” is one of the qualifications of a minister (1 Tim. 3:2); and it has been correctly said, “Apt to teach implies apt to learn.” A growing minister (or church member) must be a student of the Word. Before he teaches others he must teach himself (Rom. 2:21). His spiritual progress is an example to his flock and an encouragement to others.

Use your spiritual gifts (v. 14). So much has been written in recent years about spiritual gifts that we have almost forgotten the graces of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). The word gift is the Greek word charisma. It simply means “a gracious gift from God.” (The world uses the word charisma to describe a person with magnetic personality and commanding appearance.) Every Christian has the gift of the Spirit (Rom. 8:9) and at least one gift from the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:1–11). The gift of the Spirit, and the gifts from the Spirit, are bestowed by God at the moment of conversion (see 1 Cor. 12:13ff.).

However, when God calls a believer into a special place of ministry, He can (and often does) impart a spiritual gift for that task. When Timothy was ordained by the elders (“presbytery”), he received an enabling gift from God when the elders laid hands on him. But for some reason, Timothy had neglected to cultivate this gift that was so necessary to his spiritual progress and ministry. In fact, Paul had to admonish him in his second letter, “Stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands” (2 Tim. 1:6).

It is encouraging to know that the God who calls us also equips us to do His work. We have nothing in ourselves that enables us to serve Him; the ministry must all come from God (1 Cor. 15:9–10; Phil. 4:13; 1 Tim. 1:12). However, we must not be passive; we must cultivate God’s gifts, use them, and develop them in the ministry of the local church and wherever God puts us.

Devote yourself fully to Christ (v. 15). “Meditate” carried the idea of “be in them, give yourself totally to them.” Timothy’s spiritual life and ministry were to be the absorbing, controlling things in his life, not merely sidelines that he occasionally practiced. There can be no real pioneer advance in one’s ministry without total dedication to the task. “No man can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24).

While I do not want to sound critical, I must confess that I am disturbed by the fact that too many pastors and Christian workers divide their time and interest between the church and some sideline activities. It may be real estate, trips to the Holy Land, politics, civic duties, or even denominational service. Their own spiritual lives suffer, and their churches suffer, because these men are not devoting themselves wholly to their ministry. “This one thing I do” was Paul’s controlling motive, and it ought to be ours too (Phil. 3:13). “A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways” (James 1:8).

Take spiritual inventory (v. 16). Examine your own heart in the light of the Word of God. Note that Paul put “thyself” ahead of “the doctrine.” Paul had given this same warning to the Ephesian elders in his farewell message: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves” (Acts 20:28). A servant of God can be so busy helping others that he neglects himself and his own spiritual walk.

The great American evangelist of the 1800s, Charles Finney, used to preach on this text. He titled his sermon “Preacher, Save Thyself!” That sermon is needed today, for we are seeing people having to leave the ministry because their lives have not kept up with their profession. Moral problems, divorces, and other kinds of shameful conduct have destroyed many of God’s servants. “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

The building up of the saved and the winning of the lost are the purposes for our ministry, to the glory of God. But God must work in us before He can effectively work through us (Phil. 2:12–13). As good ministers, we preach the Word; as godly ministers, we practice the Word; as growing ministers, we progress in the Word.

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