

“A Good Servant of Jesus Christ”

1 Timothy 4:6-16

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What makes a good preacher? As we think about that question, and as we let it sink in just a little bit, I would imagine that if we could have a huge discussion on this, we would probably end up with more opinions than there are people in this building! As I was growing up, I remember seeing an article hanging on the wall of my dad’s office at the church building, and the article was entitled, “Definition of a Preacher.” According to that article,

He is one charged of God to speak and live the truth. He is responsible to God for his words and deeds, and dependent upon the grace of God’s people for the support of himself and his family.

He must love the Lord supremely and become a specialist in all matters pertaining to religion, ethics, morality, and spirituality. He is not burdened with punching a clock at the beginning of his day; neither is he blessed with a 5 o’clock whistle. He is on the job or subject to call 24 hours a day and can never lie down at night and feel that his task is done, nor can he wake up in the morning with nothing to do.

He must be strong enough to teach and preach the word of God fearlessly, wise enough to rebuke and admonish in the spirit of love, kind enough to encourage and strengthen those who are enduring tribulation, no matter what the cause. He must be loving enough to show the deepest compassion upon those experiencing sorrow; he must have the fortitude to gently nudge in the right direction those who have wandered from the paths of righteousness. He must be prudent enough to use sparingly a firmness with those who deliberately neglect their duty toward God. Then he must have enough heart to realize that all are human and if he were to expect perfection, he would rule himself out of the house of God, for the Bible teaches that none will be perfect in this life.

He is often a would-be lawyer, doctor, nurse, lecturer, relief agent, editor, entertainer, salesman, scholar, director, promoter, and various other things; but he is always a preacher and must not forget it. The backbone of his existence is, and ever will be, the need to study, for without a constant study of the Bible he will soon lose the right to be a preacher at all.

He visits shut-ins, sits up with the sick, marries the lovers, buries the dead, laughs with the happy, and weeps with the sad. He never justifies himself when rebuked for failing in some way. He learns much about many people, which he treats confidentially, and never indulges one word more than is necessary for that person's good.

Finally, he smiles agreeably when someone says, "What a job! Nothing to do but preach for half an hour every Sunday!"

Well, that may be a rather accurate and interesting summary of what the preacher does, but we come back to the basic question: What makes a good preacher? What should the preacher be doing? What should his priorities be? And thankfully, as you can imagine, there is a Scripture that answers this question. This morning I would invite you to take a copy of the Bible and turn with me to the book of 1 Timothy, to 1 Timothy 4. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on page 1857. Other than my own father, the preacher I admire most in this life is brother Earl Edwards who now serves as an elder and preaches from time to time at the Lord's church in Finger, Tennessee. When I had brother Edwards as a professor in "The Preacher and His Work" class at Freed-Hardeman University, he gave one of the most helpful assignments that I have ever had in any class. I believe it was on the first day of class he told us to find some time to read through the books of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus five times in five different translations, all in one sitting. And brother Edwards said that if we could understand what Paul was writing to those two preachers, only then we would have a balanced and Scriptural view of what a preacher should be doing. It was a powerful and eye-opening assignment. This morning, then, I would like for us to look together at a paragraph from one of those books that directly addresses what a preacher should be doing and what is necessary to be considered a good servant of Jesus Christ. If you will, please look with me at 1 Timothy 4:6-16...

⁶ In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following. ⁷ But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; ⁸ for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. ⁹ It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance. ¹⁰ For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers. ¹¹ Prescribe and teach these things. ¹² Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe. ¹³ Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. ¹⁴ Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. ¹⁵ Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. ¹⁶ Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.

As we look back over these 11 verses, we will discover that the success of a preacher is not determined by the number of degrees on his wall, but his effectiveness is directly tied to his role as a servant of Jesus Christ. And with that in mind, I would suggest several areas of emphasis for any preacher of the gospel. And we are studying this passage today so that all of us (including myself) will have a deeper understanding of what God is looking for in a preacher.

I. **And as we look back at the text itself, we find first of all, that a gospel preacher must make it a priority to STUDY THE WORD OF GOD.**

As Paul says in verse 6, the good servant of Christ Jesus will be, *“...constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following.”* As Jesus said in Matthew 4:4, *“MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.”* The flip side of this comes in verse 7 as we find that the good servant of Christ Jesus will, *“...have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women.”* The idea is that Timothy must watch his spiritual diet. He must cut out the fat and the junk food (avoiding what is not true), and he must make it his mission in life to be *“constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine.”* As Paul says, this is to go on *“constantly,”* and so just as we always need to eat nutritious food, we constantly need to nourish ourselves on the word of God. And then, according to the last part of verse 7, tied to this idea of nutrition, we find that we are to *“discipline”* ourselves, *“for the purpose of godliness.”* A lot of times, people may think of *“discipline”* in terms of some kind of punishment, but the word that Paul uses here is the same word behind our English word “gymnastics.” And so just as a gymnast must train to be good at what he or she does, so also the preacher must practice *“discipline”* in studying the word of God. The word brings across the idea of strenuous exercise or training.

And really, this applies to all of us as Christians. We hold in our hands the greatest most amazing book ever written. The word of God tells us everything we need to know. Yes, it is a big book—it has 1,189 chapters, it contains 31,173 verses, and so it takes a lot of reading, a lot of studying, a lot of thinking, it takes a lot of meditating to “get it,” but when we invest the time, it is worth it! This book will change the way we live. In fact, that is what the Bible is for, and so it is incredibly important to nourish ourselves on the word of God. [Ray Stedman, 1981; *A Good Minister*]

Of course we know there are many things distracting us, things that are trying to turn our attention away from the word of God. And so the question is: What are we nourished on? What do we put in our minds? What do we feed on, on a daily basis? Are we feeding on the word of God, as we should? Are we studying God’s word with the same dedication that perhaps a gymnast would have? Have we allowed television, and Facebook, and maybe movies or music to fill a void in our lives that should perhaps be filled by the word of God instead? Paul’s warning to Timothy, then, was to avoid those *“worldly fables,”* and not to allow those things that do not really matter to sneak in push out any time that needs to be spent studying and absorbing the word of God. As Paul went on to say in **verse 15**, *“Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all.”* As I see it, Paul was saying that if Timothy did not study, the congregation would be able to see through it. For those of you who have preached, you know that it takes a lot of study and preparation to present a lesson from the word of God. In fact, the old rule in public speaking is that a speaker must spend half an hour in preparation for every minute of speaking. Preaching, then, is not a matter of just getting up and sharing whatever comes to mind at the moment, it is not a matter of just passing along something the preacher thought up on Saturday night or early Sunday morning, but it involves some in-depth research and study. Paul, then, emphasizes the idea that a good servant of Jesus Christ must study the word of God.

II. **There is a second basic idea for us to consider here, and that is, a good servant of Jesus must also PREACH THE WORD OF GOD.**

And the idea is repeated several times. Right away in verse 6, for example, Paul tells Timothy that he is to, *“point[ing] out these things to the brethren.”* Literally, the idea is that Timothy is to *“put these things*

before” the brethren, like perhaps a rancher would put grass before the cattle. And then in verse 11, Paul tells Timothy that he is to, **“Prescribe and teach these things.”** One translation says that Timothy is to, **“Keep commanding and teaching these things.”** The word **“prescribe”** or **“command”** translates a word that refers to putting an announcement or a report out there in front of somebody. It is the idea of, **“Here! Look at this!”** And then in verse 13, Paul tells Timothy that he is to, **“...give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.”** And the idea here is that the word of God is to be the focus of everything the preacher has to say. If it is not from the word of God, then it does not really matter. The word of God is to be read out loud, and then it is to be taught and explained in a way that connects with the congregation, in a way that means something, in a way that encourages us to do what the Bible is telling us to do.

The kind of preaching and teaching that Paul wants Timothy to do seems very similar to the kind of teaching that was done by the Levites following the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem in Nehemiah 8:8, **“They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.”** And so just as the Levites read the word of God and explained it, so also the preacher is to preach. He is to preach the word of God. As some of you may know and realize, this is why I try to preach what are known as “expository” sermons. There are basically two kinds of sermons: 1.) There are expository sermons that are based on one paragraph of Scripture, and most of the supporting material for the sermon comes from that one passage, and then 2.) There are topical sermons, where the preacher chooses a topic and then goes looking for verses to support the topic. In expository preaching, there may be fewer actual Scripture references than in a topical sermon, but the focus throughout the lesson is on the word of God. The preacher, then, is to preach the word of God.

After all, the word “preacher” refers to someone who proclaims a message. The word was used in the ancient world to refer to the work of a town crier, to the herald who roamed the streets at night and called out the message, “Three o’clock and all’s well!” The town crier was not just making stuff up, but he went out there with a message from the king, he did not have permission to change that message, but his job was to communicate the king’s message with accuracy and with authority. The Lord’s servant, then, will put a priority on preaching the word of God.

III. There is a third basic concept we need to consider in this passage, and it comes in the idea that a good servant will LIVE GOD’S WORD.

Not only will he study it and preach it, but he must also live it, he must demonstrate the word of God. And just to illustrate the importance of a good example and what it can mean to a person’s influence, maybe I could just call out a few names, and I would invite you to think about the first thing that comes to mind with each one. What about Tiger Woods? What about Lindsey Lohan? What about Mel Gibson? You see, each of these people has some tremendous talent, but recently they have each been thrown in the media spotlight for making some amazingly poor decisions. And so we see a warning that can also apply to the preacher. Yes, he must study the word of God, and yes, he must preach the word of God, but he must also live the word of God; otherwise, all of the study and preaching may quite easily be for nothing; in fact, it may easily do much more harm than good. Perhaps the shortest and best definition of preaching is, “A good man, speaking well.”

For this reason, we find in verse 12 that Timothy is to set an example. He was a younger preacher, and so Paul points out that Timothy will need to make a special effort to overcome any bias that his audience would perhaps have against his age. According to Paul, Timothy can overcome that bias by setting an example in, **“...speech, conduct, love, faith and purity.”** In his speech, Timothy was to choose his words carefully, he was

to set an example through the words that he spoke. In conduct, Timothy was to apply God's word to himself first. In love, Timothy was to love the work and love the brethren. He was to love God in his personal life. In faith, Timothy was also to set an example. His faith was to be an inspiration to the congregation. And in purity, Timothy was to set the bar high, his personal life and even his thoughts were to be pure. He was to be an example in **"...speech, conduct, love, faith and purity."**

And as we learned earlier, Timothy was to serve God in such a way (according to **verse 15**) that his **"...progress** [would] **be evident to all."** In other words, Timothy was to lead the way. The word **"progress"** in **verse 15** is a military word. Literally, it refers to **"cutting forward,"** the idea of a scout who presses ahead perhaps with a machete, cutting the way forward so that others can see the path and can follow along. And so by setting an example in his personal life, the preacher is to cut forward, his **"progress"** is to be evident to the rest of the congregation, not as a ruler but as an example. It has been said that the preacher cannot lead where he has not been himself.

And at least in some way, this applies to all of us. All of us are an example to someone. How do we respond at work when someone lashes out at us? Somebody is watching that. How do we interact with our families when we are tired at the end of a hard day? Somebody is watching that. Are we opening our homes to strangers? Are we caring for the poor? Are we tenderhearted, forgiving others just as Christ has forgiven us? Somebody is watching that. All of us are examples to somebody.

Paul, then, very clearly tells the young preacher Timothy that he is to study God's word, he is to preach God's word, and he is also to live God's word.

Conclusion:

As we come to the end of our lesson this morning, I would simply ask that we look back at verse 16 as a summary of the whole chapter. How important is all this? In verse 16, Paul says, **"Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you."** That is a powerful statement! If the preacher studies God's word, and preaches God's word, and lives God's word, Paul says that as he does this he ensures salvation not only for himself, but also for any of those who will listen.

Thank you so much for allowing me to serve as the preacher for this congregation! It is a great honor, it is a serious responsibility with eternal consequences, and as always, I would ask that you remember me in your prayers every day.

The Bible teaches that God sent His only Son into this world as a sacrifice for our sins, to pay the price for our rebellion against God. Rebellion is what sin is—crossing a line that God has told us not to cross. We respond to the sacrifice of Jesus by turning back to God, by turning away from our sins. We then accept God's gift by allowing ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism, immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. At that point, the Christian life begins, we are born into God's family, God places us in His kingdom, and we work together with other Christians spreading the good news from that point until the day we die. If you are ready to join us in that mission, we would invite you to obey the gospel this morning. If you are ready to do whatever it takes to make things right with God, you can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org