

Qualities of an Excellent Servant, Part 1

Scripture: 1 Timothy 4:6–9

Code: 54-30

INTRODUCTION

In 1 Timothy 4:6-16 the apostle Paul lists the qualifications of an excellent servant of Jesus Christ. The key phrase appears in verse 6: "Thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ." In a sense, it's an underlying theme of the whole epistle, which was written to instruct Timothy on how to minister to the church at Ephesus.

A. Excellent Service

The Greek word translated "good" could better be translated "noble," "admirable," or "excellent." It is used back 1 Timothy 3:1 to speak of the work of ministry and now it is used to identify the kind of man to be in ministry.

"Minister" is the translation of the Greek word diakonos, from which we get the English word deacon. It means "servant" and is used of those who hold the office of deacon in the church, as described in chapter 3. Although the word is not used here in a technical way to designate that office, it implies that anyone who serves in any capacity in ministry must see himself as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

B. Willing Service

The word diakonos is different say from the word doulos, which is also often translated "servant." Whereas doulos often refers to a slave under subjection, diakonos emphasizes a servant with a higher degree of freedom who yet serves willingly. The word conveys the idea of usefulness and implies that all Christians are willingly pursue usefulness to the cause of Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 Paul says, "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful." We are called to be servants and stewards, managing that which belongs to God in a way that will bring honor to His name. Paul's instruction to Timothy is applicable for all who serve the Lord.

C. Positive Service

In 1 Timothy 4:1-5 Paul talked about doctrines of demons propagated by seducing spirits through lying hypocrites. Having warned Timothy that false teaching isn't human but demonic, he then tells Timothy how to be a good and effective minister in the face of false doctrine. Yet in instructing Timothy how to deal with false doctrine, he majors on the positive, not on the negative. Rather than encouraging Timothy to develop a defensive ministry of refuting and denouncing error, Paul emphasizes taking the offensive approach by teaching the Word of God (vv. 6, 11, 13, 16). That tells me ministry must primarily involve building up the people of God; not exclusively identifying and attacking error. That can be difficult, especially if you are committed to the truth. I have to constantly resist the temptation to denounce the many things that bother me so greatly and focus on establishing the truth in the hearts and minds of those I teach. I believe teaching the truth provides the basis for being able to spot error. The emphasis of ministry is to be positive.

In verses 6-16 Paul gives eleven characteristics of being a excellent minister of Christ. They are practical and helpful objectives for everyone who desires serve the Lord by leading His people.

LESSON

I. THE EXCELLENT SERVANT WARNS PEOPLE OF ERROR (v. 6a)

"If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things"

A. The Act of Reminding

Although the ministry is not to be dominated by a negative approach, that doesn't mean there isn't a place for warning others about the destructiveness of false doctrine. Paul makes a transition from exposing demonic doctrines to explaining how to be an excellent servant of Jesus Christ by instructing Timothy to warn the church about such doctrines. There is a necessity to remind Christians of error. Ministry demands warning.

The Greek word translated "to put in remembrance of" means "to lay before." Its use here as a present participle speaks of continually reminding people of the reality of false doctrine. There is no idea of commanding people, but of giving them counsel and advice in a gentle, humble manner. A servant of Christ must teach people to be discerning by encouraging them to think biblically and be able to discern between truth and error.

1. The resource identified

Identifying error is not to be the theme of the average pastor's ministry, but a recurring reminder. When Paul met with the Ephesian elders he said, "I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore, watch, and remember, that for the space of three years I ceased not to warn everyone night and day with tears. And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up" (Acts 20:29-32). Paul continually made the Ephesians aware of error and pointed them to the positive solution of the Word. The truth supplies the foundation from which error can be dealt with properly.

Christians are prevented from being "children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14) by being firmly grounded in the Word of God. First John 2:13-14 reinforces the fact that a believer learns to deal with satanic error by being strong in the Word, which is the sword of the Spirit. That's the only way fight and win against being who disguise themselves as angels of light and ministers of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:14-15).

2. The resource ignored

I believe the church's failure to be discerning in this generation has allowed it to be infiltrated by all kinds of error. It is confused, weak, and in some cases apostate. In many churches all you hear are watered-down sermonettes for Christianettes! Limp theology and convictionless preaching have replaced strong doctrine and clear exposition of Scripture. The legacy has been tragic. The church has been flooded with Charismatic confusion, unbiblical psychology, occultic influences, success-oriented philosophy, prosperity doctrines, and positive confessions.

B. The Accountability of Reminding

The church must draw the lines between error and truth and build up its people in the Word of God. God hold pastors accountable to warn their people of spiritual danger. The Lord told Ezekiel, "Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore, hear the word at my mouth and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood will I require at thine hand" (Ezek. 3:17-18). If spiritual leaders fail to do that, they will have to answer to God (Heb. 13:17). Although the church today seems to embrace everything, including error, the man of God must develop convictions based upon a biblical theology, and continually warn his people of error. He is committed to protecting the flock; not petting the sheep.

II. THE EXCELLENT SERVANT IS AN EXPERT STUDENT OF SCRIPTURE (v. 6b)

"Nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, unto which thou hast attained"

A. The Past Examined

An excellent minister is also an expert student of Scripture. How the church ever lost touch with that

is hard for me to understand. Sad to say, many Christian pastors have a minimal understanding of Scripture and a commitment to studying it. There was a day in the history of the church when the great students of Scripture and theology were pastors. In the Puritan era pastors were producing many excellent books on doctrine and theology. Rather than being just good communicators, they were first and foremost students of God's Word. They had the capability of understanding, interpreting and applying the Word of God with great precision and wisdom.

B. The Process Explained

The Greek word translated "nourished up" is a present passive participle, implying that being nourished with the Word of God is a continual process of feeding. That involves reading Scripture, meditating on it, dialoguing over it, and studying it until you've mastered its contents.

It is essential that we be continually nourished by "the words of faith." That phrase refers to the body of Christian truth in Scripture. We are to master Scripture. We'll never do it, but that's our pursuit. We are to be expert in that area; not just good communicators who can tickle people's ears and make them think they heard something enjoyable (2 Tim. 4:3). We need to accurately interpret and defend the Word of God. Not only are we to be nourished directly by "the words of faith" but also by "good doctrine" (Gk., *kale didaskalia*). "Good doctrine" encompasses the teaching of biblical truth and the application of its principles. Spiritual growth is based upon our interaction with biblical truth.

1. 1 Peter 2:2--We grow spiritually as we study the Bible.
2. 2 Timothy 2:15--Paul said, "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." We are called--above and beyond all other elements in the ministry--to be expert students of the Word of God.
3. Ephesians 6:17--We are to bear "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" and be able to use it in any way at any time.
4. Colossians 3:16--We are to have the Word of Christ dwelling in us richly and deeply.
5. 2 Timothy 3:16-17--Since the Word of God "is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works," then we must know it.

To be able to think and speak biblically a pastor has to spend a large proportion of his time interacting with the text of Scripture. It is an inexhaustible treasure that demands a lifetime to just begin to understand its full riches. There is no virtue in being ignorant. Unfortunately we are a generation of people who do not like to sit and think; we prefer to be entertained. In spite of that we are to be committed to studying, understanding, and articulating the Word of God.

C. The Preparation Evaluated

The phrase "unto which thou hast attained" in verse 6 is better translated "which you have been following" (NASB). Paul acknowledged that Timothy was already on schedule. Timothy had originally been taught spiritual truths from his mother and grandmother and mother when he was a boy (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14-15). Paul himself had been instrumental in teaching Timothy (2 Tim. 2:2). He encourages him to continue being nourished by that same Christian truth revealed in God's Word.

The excellent pastor continually feeds on divine truth. He cannot give out what he does not take in. The better learner he is, the better teacher he will be. A Bible teacher must spend many more hours in preparation than he actually spends in teaching. That is the natural application of Jesus' command to make disciples, teaching them to observe everything he had commanded them (Matt. 28:20). Sadly, there are many men who have no delight in their studies. They spend an hour now and then, or even no time at all. Study seems for many an unwelcome task that interrupts the easy schedule of activity. They like to have guests as often as possible in their pulpits so they don't have to spend time studying, and prefer the variety of administrative tasks and meetings. And the minimal study that they do produces a weak sermon that fails to penetrate the hearts and minds of the listeners.

D. The Pursuit Exemplified

Since the Bereans were considered noble because they searched the Scriptures daily (Acts. 17:10-

11), how much more should those who are in the role of teachers study them! The great men of God who have left their imprint on the church through the years have been those who have had a great understanding of Scripture. William Tyndale, the man responsible for getting the New Testament translated into the English language in 1525, was in prison facing martyrdom. He wrote a letter to the governor in chief, asking that these possessions be sent to him: a warmer cap, a warmer coat, and a piece of cloth to patch his leggings. Then he said, "But most of all I beg and beseech and entreat your clemency to be urgent with the commissary, that he will kindly permit me to have the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study" (J. F. Mozley, William Tyndale [N. Y. MacMillan, 1937], p. 334). Any seminary student who has struggled with Hebrew cannot relate to such a request! But later in life when you plunge more deeply into the Word of God, it's wonderful to be able to say that what you cherish most is what helps you understand the Word of God the best. That was the desire of William Tyndale and of Paul as he encouraged Timothy.

III. THE EXCELLENT SERVANT AVOIDS THE INFLUENCE OF UNHOLY TEACHING (v. 7a)

"Refuse profane and old wives' fables"

A. A Contradiction to the Truth

As strong as a servant of God is in the Word, he is inversely disinterested in unholy teaching. The Greek word translated "profane" (*bebelos*) refers to something radically separate from what is holy, particularly anything that contradicts the Word of God. "Fables" is a translation of the Greek word *muthos*, from which the English word myth is derived. Second Timothy 4:4 says that some "shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables." So truth and fables are seen as opposites. The Christian is to be nourished by the truth and refuse that which opposes it. The identification of fables with old women has a cultural meaning. The phrase was used in philosophical circles as a sarcastic epithet when one wanted to heap disdain on a particular viewpoint. It conveyed the picture of a senile old lady telling a fairy tale to a child. It was applied to things lacking credibility.

B. A Commitment to the Truth

The mind is a precious thing. God wants those who serve as spiritual leaders to have pure minds saturated with the truth of God's Word. There's no place for foolish myths or unholy contradictions to the truth. Yet somehow our society would rather follow them than biblical truth.

Too Much Bible? The mark of theological scholarship in some circles is no longer how well a man knows the Bible but how well he understands the speculations of the secular academic establishment.

When I was considering completing a doctoral degree in theology, the representative of the graduate program at the college looked over my transcripts and concluded I had had too much Bible and theology in my undergraduate work. So he gave me a list of 200 books of preparatory reading before I could be admitted to the program. I checked out the list with someone who knew those various titles and learned that none of them contained anything but liberal theology and humanistic philosophy--they were full of profane old wives' fables passed off as scholarship! The college also required me to take a course called "Jesus and the Cinema." That involved watching contemporary movies and evaluating them on whether they were antagonistic to or supportive of the Jesus ethic. The divine Jesus had been reduced to an ethic. I met with the representative again and said, "I just want to let you know that I have spent all my life to this point learning the truth, and I can't see any value in spending the next couple of years learning error." I put the materials down on his desk and walked away.

I'm grateful to God that from the beginning of my training right on through to today, my mind has been filled with the truth of God. My mind is not a battleground of indecision about what is true and what is false, over things "which minister questions rather than godly edifying" (1 Tim. 1:4). I can

speaking with conviction because there's no equivocation in my mind. I have avoided the plethora of supposed intellectuals and scholars who disagree with biblical truth. However, one man I knew had problems in that area. He went to a liberal seminary to prepare for ministry, but came out a bartender. The confusion of liberalism had destroyed his motivation to serve God. Your mind is a precious thing and it needs to be kept clear from satanic lies. The excellent minister maintains his biblical convictions and clarity of mind by exposing himself to the Word of God.

IV. THE EXCELLENT SERVANT DISCIPLINES HIMSELF IN PERSONAL GODLINESS (vv. 7b-9)

A. The Exhortation (v. 7b)

"Exercise thyself rather unto godliness."

J. Oswald Sanders says in his book *Spiritual Leadership*, "Spiritual ends can be achieved only by spiritual men who employ spiritual methods" ([Chicago: Moody, 1980], p. 40). The issue in ministry is godliness. It isn't how clever you are or how well you communicate; it's whether you know the Word of God and are leading a godly life. Ministry is an overflow of the latter.

1. "Exercise"

a) Training for esteem The English word gymnasium comes from the Greek word here translated "exercise" (*gumnazo*), used of those who trained themselves in athletic endeavors. It implies a rigorous, self-sacrificing kind of training. In Greek culture, the gymnasium was a focal point of the city for youths between the ages of 16 and 18. Since athletic ability was highly esteemed, there was usually a gymnasium in every town. The cultic exaltation of the body resulted in a preoccupation with exercise and athletic training and competition, not dissimilar to our own day. b) Training for godliness Paul alluded to that cultural reality in exhorting Timothy to exercise himself for the goal of godliness, saying in effect, "If you're going to go into training, concentrate on training your inner nature for godliness. The Greek word for godliness is *eusebeia* and means "reverence," "piety," or "true spiritual virtue." "Keep yourself in training for godliness" would be an accurate way to translate Paul's exhortation to Timothy. (1) 1 Corinthians 9:27--Paul understood the importance of discipline in the ministry: "I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified" (NASB). How many men in the ministry have that goal? There's no great longing for holiness or a willingness to pursue it. So many ministers are more preoccupied with the externals and lack the necessary spiritual discipline. (2) 2 Corinthians 7:1--Paul exhorted all Christians to be "perfecting holiness in the fear of God." That requires building up the spiritual nature to be strong and capable in doing the will of God. (3) 2 Timothy 2:3-5--Paul told Timothy to "endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier. And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully." As a soldier endures hardship, makes sacrifices, and cuts himself off from the world to please the one who enlisted him; and as an athlete must diligently train and compete within the rules, so must a servant of God make sacrifices in disciplining himself and confining himself to God's standards.

2. "Godliness"

(See the next chapter, *Qualities of an Excellent Servant*, Part 2.)

B. The Explanation (v. 8)

1. The minimal benefit of physical exercise (v. 8a)

"Bodily exercise profiteth little"

Physical exercise profits little in two ways: extent and duration. In extent, it benefits only the body and not the spirit. In duration, it's good only for a short time. You could spend years getting yourself in shape, but as soon as you let up, you immediately start losing what you've worked so hard to achieve.

2. The maximum benefit of spiritual exercise (v. 8b)

"But godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is

to come."

Godliness is profitable not only for the body, but for the soul as well. It's profitable not just for a brief time but for this lifetime and the rest of eternity. If you're going to make a New Year's resolution, don't resolve to go to the gym three times a week if you're not spending time in the Word of God every day and cultivating godliness. The present benefit of spiritual discipline is a fulfilled, God-blessed, fruitful, and useful life. If you get involved in spiritual gymnastics the blessings of godliness will carry on into eternity. Although many people spend far more time exercising their bodies than their souls, the excellent servant of Jesus Christ disciplines himself spiritually.

C. The Evaluation (v. 9)

"This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance."

That's a formula Paul used four other times in the pastoral epistles (1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8). "Worthy of all acceptance" adds emphasis to his affirmation. It identifies a trustworthy statement or an axiom that is patently obvious. This formula was used to introduce proverbial statements that were commonly understood and used in the church. One example is seen in 1 Timothy 3:1: "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop [elder], he desireth a good work."

The greater benefit of spiritual discipline is an obvious truth. The introductory formula of verse 9 refers back to verse 8, rather than to verse 10. Verse 8 is more proverbial in style, using common words in a simple format that would be easy to memorize. Also the words "for, therefore" at the beginning of verse 10, along with a statement of personal labor and struggle make it less suitable as a "faithful saying" than verse 8.

It is spiritually immature to preoccupy ourselves with our bodies. Doing so betrays a limited perception of spiritual and eternal realities. It should be axiomatic in the church that Christians are a group of people who are in spiritual training to be conformed to the will of God, not a group of body worshippers.

Godliness is the pursuit of the excellent minister. He uses all the means of grace available--prayer, Bible study, the Lord's Table, confession of sin, active service, accountability, and sometimes fasting--in the discipline of godliness.

What then makes an excellent minister? Is it the size of his church? Is it whether he's on radio and television, or whether he's a dynamic speaker? God's evaluation is: Is he discerning and does he warn his people about error? Is he diligent in studying Scripture? Does he have a pure mind and avoid the influence of unholy teaching? And does he rigorously exercise himself to be godly? That's the stuff of which an excellent minister is made.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What is an underlying theme of 1 Timothy?
2. In instructing Timothy how to deal with false doctrine, Paul majors on a positive approach to ministry. What can we learn from that?
3. A servant of Christ must encourage people to think biblically and be able to discern between _____ and _____.
4. Although Paul made certain to warn the Ephesians about false teachers, what positive solution did he point them to (Acts 20:29-32)?
5. Who is held accountable for warning a church of doctrinal errors?
6. How is the general commitment of pastors today to studying the Bible different from that of Puritan pastors?
7. How is one nourished by Scripture and doctrine?
8. Rather than being just a good communicator, what should a preacher be able to do?
9. How had Timothy been nourished in Scripture in the past?
10. Describe the kind of teaching that a servant of God should avoid.

11. What kind of mind should a spiritual leader have?
12. What kind of discipline was a preoccupation for many in the ancient Greek world? In contrast, what kind of training did Paul exhort Timothy to pursue (vv. 7-8)?
13. In what realm is the greatest benefit of discipline achieved? Explain.
14. What did the phrase "a faithful saying" (v. 9) introduce in the early church?
15. What means of grace does a servant of God employ in pursuing godliness?

Pondering the Principles

1. William Tyndale's commitment to knowing and understanding God's Word made an unprecedented impact on the English-speaking world. In spite of his imprisonment and the risk to his life, he continued with his personal study and translation of the Bible. Evaluate your desire to know the Word in light of Tyndale's example. Does your Bible sit on a shelf and collect dust, or is it an active part of your spiritual growth? How are you letting God's Word teach, correct, and train you in righteous living (2 Tim. 3:16-17)?
2. A pastor has a hard enough job to discipline himself for godliness, let alone to diligently study Scripture to instruct his congregation and warn them about doctrinal error. Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief; for that is unprofitable for you." Pray that God would raise up many faithful men and women in your church who can assist your pastor in serving God by ministering to others (Eph. 4:12). Encourage your pastor often and set an example of an obedient and submissive spirit for others. And be ready to share materials things with those who teach you spiritual truths (Gal. 6:6).
3. Evaluate your level of discipline in the physical and spiritual realms. Although a measure of physical exercise is important for your physical and emotional health, are you preoccupied with it to the extent that you have no time available to develop a godly character? Are you an example of godliness of other believers? If not, determine what steps you must take to become more spiritually fit. Memorize 1 Timothy 4:7b-8: "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; 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" (NASB).

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