

Qualities of an Excellent Servant, Part 4

Scripture: 1 Timothy 4:13–14

Code: 54-33

REVIEW

Each portion of Scripture is usually built around a particular theme or emphasis. First Timothy 4:6-16 is no different. The theme of this passage is in a short phrase of verse 6: "Thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ." What does it mean to be an excellent servant of Jesus Christ?

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

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

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

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

V. THE EXCELLENT SERVANT IS COMMITTED TO HARD WORK (v. 10)

VI. THE EXCELLENT SERVANT TEACHES WITH AUTHORITY (v. 11)

VII. THE EXCELLENT SERVANT IS A MODEL OF SPIRITUAL VIRTUE (v. 12)

Those first seven qualities can be summed up in seven words. The excellent servant who warns people of error is discerning. We are to know the difference between truth and error. The expert student of Scripture has the ability of scholarship. He who avoids the influence of unholy teaching is separate. We are to set ourselves apart from whatever influences us toward unrighteousness. He who pursues godliness is holy. He who works hard is diligent. He who teaches with authority has power. And he who is a model of spiritual virtue has integrity. Those characteristics mark the man who serves Jesus Christ with excellence. They also should be characteristic of all of us.

LESSON

VIII. THE EXCELLENT SERVANT HAS A THOROUGHLY BIBLICAL MINISTRY (v. 13)

"Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine."

A. Total Preparation

The phrase "till I come" implies that Paul was going to return to Ephesus and meet Timothy there again. First Timothy 3:14 attests to that: "These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly." So until Paul returned, he wanted Timothy to give his attention to the reading, the exhortation, and the doctrine (or teaching).

The Greek verb translated "give attendance" is *prosecho*. It is a present active imperative, a continuing command. Paul is commanding Timothy to continually give attention to reading, exhortation, and teaching. It was to become Timothy's way of life. Commentator Donald Guthrie tells us that the verb "implies previous preparation in private" (The Pastoral Epistles [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], p. 97). The same verb is used in Hebrews 7:13 of the priests who were continually devoted to their service at the altar. So Timothy was to center his ministry on reading, exhortation, and teaching.

B. Total Ministry

1. The reading

In verse 13 a definite article appears in the Greek text before the word translated "reading." Timothy was to give attention to "the reading." In the services of the early church a time was set aside for the reading of Scripture. It was followed by an exposition of the text.

When Paul told Timothy to give attention to the reading, that meant he would have to be careful

about the text he selected, in the accuracy of his exposition, and all the matters regarding his preparation.

a) The pattern of the synagogueThe early church drew the pattern for its services from the synagogue.(1) Affirmed by Jesus(a) Standing up to readAccording to Luke 4:15 Jesus had been teaching in the synagogues in Galilee. Verse 16 says, "He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read." As a visiting rabbi, He was invited to read a portion of Scripture. Whoever read from Scripture always stood up to read, a custom derived from Nehemiah 8:1-5. After rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, the people were excited about what God was doing and asked for the law of Moses to be read before them. As Ezra stood to read God's Word, the people stood for the entire length of the reading. When Jesus stood up to read, "there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet, Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:17-19). Jesus read a messianic prophecy from Isaiah 61:1.(b) Sitting down to expositVerse 20 says, "He closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down." Why did He sit down? Because the custom for teaching in all the synagogues was to be seated. He stood to read; He sat down to explain what He had read. Verses 20-21 say, "The eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears." That statement was a jolt to the people because He was claiming to be the Messiah. We know He said more than that because verse 22 says they "all bore him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth."(2) Acknowledged by the Jerusalem CouncilIn Acts 15 the Jerusalem Council met to decide how they might avoid offending the Jewish people as a result of their outreach to the Gentiles. They decided to instruct the saved Gentiles to "abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood" (v. 20). Verse 21 observes, "For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day." When the people met together in the synagogue, the book of Moses was read and then explained. That model of expository preaching comes from Nehemiah 8:8: "They read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading."b) The pattern of the New Testament churchThe New Testament epistles were to be included in such reading and exposition. When the church was founded on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:42 says the people "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine." In addition to expositing Old Testament passages, the early church taught the doctrine of the apostles, for it was understood to be the Word of God. In Colossians 4:16, Paul says, "When this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that ye also read the epistle from Laodicea." There was a time and a place for the reading of the Old Testament. The same became true of the New Testament--the writings of the apostles. Scripture needs to be explained so people can understand it. Obviously the further we are removed culturally, geographically, linguistically, philosophically, and historically from the original text of Scripture, the more necessary it becomes to research those facts. That's the challenge for the Bible teacher, and where his effort is needed. If anyone is to give his complete attention to teaching God's Word, he will spend a good portion of his life reconstructing the language, philosophy, geography, culture, and context to make the Word of God understandable. That's why Paul told Timothy to give his complete attention to that task.

2. The exhortation

If the reading and exposition of Scripture tell us what it means, then what is the exhortation all about. It is a call for people to apply it. To exhort is to warn people to obey with a view toward judgment. We are to encourage people to respond properly, telling them about the blessings or the consequences of their actions. We are to explain what the Bible means and then encourage people to apply it.

Sometimes exhortation is counsel, sometimes it's comfort, but it always is binding on a person's conscience to amend certain behavior.

3. The teaching

The Greek word translated "doctrine" (didaskalia) means "teaching." The idea Paul is communicating is that the excellent servant gives himself to the process of systematically teaching the Word of God in every dimension of ministry. That embodies the idea of developing a system of theology. It also includes the process of teaching individuals, one-on-one or in small groups.

The systematic teaching of God's Word is a mandate for the church. The church is simply defined in terms of its ministry. I am called to read, explain, and apply the Word of God, and also to give my whole life to the process of teaching it. Our goal is to ever and always minister the Word of God in every dimension of the church's life. We are to disseminate sound teaching to all people at all times through all means. Often the church is diverted from that goal, yet that is the necessary heart and soul of its ministry.

Didaskalia appears fifteen times in the pastoral epistles. That gives us some idea of its importance to the life of the church. No wonder the pastor must be "apt to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2). Since the church's ministry revolves around teaching the Word of God, how could anyone ever hope to lead in a church if he's not a skilled teacher?

When Scripture is read, explained, applied, and lived by, the church is succeeding in its ministry. From its earliest years the church has been committed to teaching. In recent times the church has tended to drift into extraneous pursuits. As a result, the Word of God descends lower on the priority list.

Relentless Teachers

First Timothy 5:17 says, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine." The harder a man works in teaching God's Word, the more honorable he is. It's sad to realize that many men in ministry have been diverted into nice pursuits, but not the most important one.

We need to be relentless teachers. Puritan clergyman John Flavel wrote, "It is not with us, as with other labourers: They find their work as they leave it, so do not we." Picture the cabinet maker who leaves his unfinished work and comes back to it as it was the next morning. Flavel continues, "Sin and Satan unravel almost all we do, the impressions we make on our people's souls in one sermon, vanish before the next" (The Works of John Flavel, vol. 6 [London: Banner of Truth, 1968], p. 569). We fight against that unraveling process all the time. That's why we have to be relentless in ministry. And that's why I repeat much of what I teach. Every good pastor and teacher knows that people forget what he teaches. So he must be repetitive. But he also realizes that people become familiar with what he teaches. When they realize they are being taught something they have already heard, they think they know it and become bored by it. The challenge for the teacher is to repeat his teaching in such a manner that makes the people think he is teaching them something new. It would be very easy for me to pack up a hundred sermons, go out on the road, and preach them over and over again. The challenge for me is to stay in the same place, say the same things over and over, yet have people think I'm teaching them something they've never heard. If you study the Bible, you'll find that Scripture does the same thing. Its principles are repeated over and over in different contexts and through different narratives.

IX. THE EXCELLENT SERVANT FULFILLS HIS CALLING (v. 14)

"Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery."

There are people who go into the ministry and bail out because they weren't called there in the first place. But sometimes people who are called into the ministry bail out, and that is a defection from

where God intends them to be.

A. The Pressure of Ministry

That Paul says, "Neglect not the gift" (which could be translated "stop neglecting the gift") may indicate that Timothy was about to neglect his ministry or had already begun to neglect it. He may even have been close to a point of departure--a point at which people can't handle the internal and external pressure of their situation.

A Look at Timothy's Dilemma

In 2 Timothy 1:3 Paul says, "Without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day." Paul knew Timothy had a difficult ministry in a hostile environment. The Ephesian church had defected both doctrinally and behaviorally. The church was immoral and aberrant in theology. Paul commissioned Timothy to set things right in the Ephesian church. That was a difficult task for someone Timothy's age, for he was working through his own spiritual development. Here he was faced with formidable foes. The Ephesian errorists propounded a high-powered, sophisticated quasi-theology. Paul told Timothy to avoid arguing with them (2 Tim. 2:16, 23).

According to 2 Timothy 1:4 Paul desired to see Timothy, "being mindful of [his] tears." Perhaps Paul had received word that Timothy was experiencing overwhelming grief over his situation. But being reminded of Timothy's true faith (v. 5), he said, "I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands" (v. 6). In comparing verse 6 with 1 Timothy 4:14, we know that Paul was one of the elders who laid hands on him.

What ultimately happened to the church at Ephesus? It left its first love and went out of existence (Rev. 2:4-5). Whatever Timothy accomplished there was short-lived. He did everything he could to keep it alive, but the church was dying. He was the best man available, but he was fighting a losing battle. That kind of situation would make any man want to give up. But Paul encouraged Timothy not to become timid and fearful, saying, "God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power Be not thou, therefore, ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner; but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:7-8). Timothy had to expect hostility. In verses 12-15 Paul says, "I also suffer these things; nevertheless, I am not ashamed Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Spirit, who dwelleth in us. This thou knowest, that all they who are in Asia turned away from me."

In 2 Timothy 2:1 Paul says, "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Paul was trying to strengthen Timothy. In verse 2 he says, "The things that thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." Then in verses 3-6 Paul encourages Timothy to be as diligent as a soldier in battle, an athlete in a race, and a farmer planting his field.

Timothy probably experienced some internal pressure as well. Second Timothy 2:22 says, "Flee also youthful lusts." Timothy was not only fighting what appeared to be a losing battle in the church, but also struggling with his own youthful lusts and desires. He may have been questioning his ability to minister for the cause of Christ because of the spiritual battles in his own life. But Paul encouraged him to separate himself from lust and false teaching, and pursue "righteousness, faith, love, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (v. 22). Paul was trying to get Timothy reoriented in his ministry.

B. The Affirmation of Ministry

1. Subjective affirmation

In verse 14 Paul tells Timothy that he was gifted for his present ministry by the Holy Spirit. In telling Timothy to fulfill his calling, Paul begins by affirming Timothy's spiritual gift. You can't credit a man for his gift because he doesn't obtain it by his own choice or effort; he is given it by sovereign grace.

a) Defining the gift The Greek verb translated "neglect not" in verse 14 is a present active imperative. It is a command with a view toward continual behavior. The Greek word translated "gift" is charisma, a reference to a gift of grace from God. Every believer is given a gift, which is a means or channel by which the Spirit of God ministers to others. I've been given the gifts of teaching and preaching. Perhaps you have been given the gift of helps, giving, or leadership. Comprehensive lists of all the gifts are in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, with references in Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4. b) Designing the gift I like to think of spiritual gifts as divine enablements. They are given to us by the Spirit of God with a sovereign design. The church is made up of many people. It functions like a body, and every person is a part of the body. The spiritual gifts we've been given blend together to enable the body to function properly. For example, Timothy was given a gift for the direct propagation of the Word. That's why Paul told him to teach, preach, command, and exhort. He was to do the work of an evangelist, making full proof of his ministry (2 Tim. 4:5). He was gifted in the areas of evangelism, preaching, teaching, and leadership--all blended together as his own unique spiritual gift. Each of us has one spiritual gift, a blend of the different gifts the Spirit has put together of each of us. Like a painter who is able to create an infinite number of colors by mixing any combination of the ten or so colors he carries on his palette, so the Spirit of God blends a little of one gift with a little of another to create the perfect combination within you. As a result, you have a unique position in the Body of Christ, with an ability to minister as no one else can. c) Desiring the gift No one has ever had to tell me what my gift is. Ever since I committed my life to Christ I've known what God wanted me to do. You receive your gift at salvation, although it may be latent for a while before it flourishes. I can look back and know God has called me to preach and teach--that has always been on my heart. I didn't know how I was going to do it, or if I'd ever be able to do it effectively, but I knew my heart's desire was to teach and preach the Word. And I'm sure that was Timothy's desire as well. When he first met Paul, I know he must have been excited about the possibility of traveling with the greatest of all living preachers. I believe that when God gives us our gift, He includes the faith necessary to operate that gift, which is manifested in the believer's desire to minister.

2. Objective affirmation

In verse 14 Paul says Timothy's gift was given to him by prophecy. That's the objective affirmation of Timothy's call to the ministry. I don't believe he received the gift through the prophecy, but I do believe there was a public affirmation of his gift by direct revelation from God. When did that happen? According to Acts 16:1-3, Paul met Timothy when he was traveling through Derbe and Lystra. Timothy had a good reputation among fellow believers there. He had a wonderful heritage--his mother and grandmother were believers. He came from a Jewish-Gentile background, which made him accessible to both cultures, and therefore an ideal man for Paul to take on his journey. Although it is not indicated in Acts 16, I believe it was at that time when a direct prophecy came from God setting aside Timothy to preach and teach the Word. It would have been similar to the event in Acts 13:2 when the Holy Spirit said, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work unto which I have called them." That was a direct revelation or prophecy from God to set apart Barnabas and Saul for ministry. After Paul met Timothy it is likely that as the church came together, the Spirit of God spoke a direct prophecy through one of the prophets, indicating the gift Timothy had received.

I should add that Timothy's experience is not normative. I'm not in the ministry today because God gave me a revelation. Timothy's gift was affirmed in the apostolic era. Today, the objective confirmation would come from providence, not direct revelation. How God arranges your circumstances and opportunities, and how He leads and directs people you meet are often the ways He affirms your call. I've had young men ask me if I think they should go to seminary. One said, "I feel so compelled to preach, but I don't know whether I should go." I said, "Do you have an opportunity to go to seminary?" He said he did. I asked him, "Can you afford to go?" Again he said he did. Then I asked, "Do you have a good seminary you can go to?" Once more he answered in the affirmative. So I said, "Does that sound like the Lord may be arranging the circumstances

providentially?" He realized that probably was true. So when you feel compelled to do something, and the opportunity presents itself, that may well be God's providential affirmation.

3. Collective affirmation

The laying on of the hands of the elders is the collective affirmation. The church affirmed Timothy's gift. I'm sure that happened during the time Acts 16:1-5 describes.

When the elders laid hands on Timothy, the church was affirming that Timothy was the right man. Through the voice of a prophet the Holy Spirit affirmed his call. And Timothy's own desire to preach and teach affirmed his calling. That's the way God continues to call people into ministry. The person first must desire to minister. Next there must be the confirmation of the providence of God through circumstances. And finally, a collective assembly of spiritual leaders must put their hands on him, thus recognizing he is qualified. So Paul encouraged Timothy to fulfill the call of God and not neglect the gift that was confirmed in him.

Spiritual Marathon Ministers

There are many people in ministry who serve for awhile but quickly fade away. They're like shooting stars or short candles. But I'm really in awe of those who are faithful to minister the Word of God right out to the end of their lives. I call them spiritual marathon ministers. They may have a small congregation, they may be unknown, but they remain faithful and fulfill their calling. In a spiritual sense, they die with their boots on.

The reason I'm in awe of those people is I've seen so many bail out of the ministry. That's not to say some of them shouldn't have, because they probably weren't called to the ministry. They may have had good intentions, and they may have served the Lord effectively for a time, but He wanted them in another place. But those who have been called, gifted, and confirmed to be in ministry need to remain there. In Acts 20:24 Paul says, "None of these things [bonds and afflictions] move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry."

According to 1 Corinthians 9:27 Paul says his biggest fear is that after having preached to others, he would end up disqualifying himself from ministry.

You'll never be able to evaluate the ministry of John MacArthur until all the evidence is in. The true mark of an excellent servant of Jesus Christ is that he fulfills his calling to the end. He's internally driven by the passion of his heart, and he's externally compelled by the opportunities God has given him and the confirmation of godly men. I remember very well the day I knelt and godly men put their hands on me to set me apart for the ministry. I have a certificate in my office with the names of those who confirmed I should do the work of the ministry for life. Fulfilling the call is a vital part of being the kind of servant God wants you to be.

CONCLUSION

The ministry is to be biblical and the minister is to be a faithful marathon runner. Excellent servants must set an example for the kind of life we're all to live. We're all called to live a biblical life and be students of the Word of God. Each of us should fulfill our giftedness and calling. There are many people in the church who do not study of the Word of God or serve God. They don't know what their gift is because they've never taken advantage of opportunities to be involved in a ministry that might reveal it. Ask yourself: Where's my ministry? What's my calling? Am I being faithful to it?

Focusing on the Facts

1. What seven words might you use to describe the first seven qualities of an excellent servant?
2. Explain the meaning of the verb translated "give attendance" in 1 Timothy 4:13?
3. What was "the reading"?
4. What things did Timothy need to be careful about regarding the reading of Scripture?

5. Explain the pattern of service in the synagogue as illustrated by Luke 4:15-22.
6. What verse gives a model of expository preaching?
7. What pattern did the New Testament church follow?
8. What is the challenge for the Bible teacher?
9. What is involved in the exhortation of Scripture?
10. What is involved in the teaching of Scripture?
11. What should be the goal of the church?
12. Why do teachers of God's Word need to be relentless?
13. Why do certain people bail out of the ministry?
14. Describe the situation Timothy faced in ministering to the church at Ephesus?
15. According to 2 Timothy 2:22, what did Paul encourage Timothy to pursue?
16. What was the subjective affirmation of Timothy's call to the ministry?
17. Explain how God designs each believer's gift.
18. What was the objective affirmation of Timothy's call to the ministry?
19. Is Timothy's experience normative for today? Explain.
20. What was the collective affirmation of Timothy's call to the ministry?

Pondering the Principles

1. Although you may not be called to teach in a church or a ministry, that doesn't alleviate you from the responsibility of learning what God's Word says. As the Bible teacher is challenged to bridge the gap between culture, geography, history, and linguistics, so are you in your own personal study. There are several tools available that can help you. In regards to culture, most commentaries will deal with it to some degree. Another good source is Alfred Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). To learn more about the geography of the area, obtain a good Bible atlas. Good tools for learning about the history of the Bible are a good Bible dictionary or *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976). The hardest aspect for most people is linguistics because they don't know Greek or Hebrew. Helpful tools are W. E. Vine's *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) for Greek and *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980) for Hebrew. (You don't have to know either Greek or Hebrew to use them.) In addition, any good concordance will help you in word study. As you begin to use those tools, your understanding of Scripture will become clearer and you will begin to know what the Bible means by what it says.
2. The goal of every believer, whether he is called to teach or not, is to remain faithful to Christ until the end of his earthly life. Look up the following verses: Matthew 10:22, 24:45-47; Hebrews 3:14; and Revelation 2:10. What waits for the believer who endures to the end? Based on Hebrews 3:14, what conclusions can you draw from someone who does not remain faithful (cf. 1 John 2:19)? According to Revelation 2:10, what reward does the believer who endures receive? With that in mind, in what manner ought you to live? As you face times of doubt and discouragement in your Christian life or ministry, draw on God's strength and remember what waits for you at the end of your faithful service.

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