

1 Timothy 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Timothy chapter 4 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.

Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness. For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, for to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hopes set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.

Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

[1 : 2 2] Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.

Practice these things. Immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

From instructions concerning the ordering of the church, in 1 Timothy chapter 4, Paul addresses Timothy more directly concerning his role in the situation in Ephesus. Firstly, there are the false teachings that he needs to address.

Then there are the ways that he needs to behave and the actions that he needs to take as a servant of Jesus Christ. Paul begins by presenting some of the challenges that the Ephesian church is facing within the framework of redemptive history.

They are in the prophesied last days. There is about to be an upheaval in the ordering of the world. And Timothy should not be surprised that these false teachings have arisen at this juncture. We can see a similar statement in 2 Timothy chapter 3 verse 1.

[2 : 3 1] But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. Jesus had also taught this in the Olivet Discourse, in places like Matthew chapter 24 verse 11 for instance.

And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. The false teaching is attributed to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons. The deceitful spirits describe the instigating forces behind these teachings.

And the teachings of demons describe the teaching in terms of their demonic content. The teachings are spread by deceitful spirits and their substance arises from demons. These teachings will deceive and lead some astray.

And the teachings will be spread by persons who have been compromised, insincere liars whose consciences have been seared. The content of these false teachings are described in verse 3.

Forbidding of marriage and requiring abstinence from foods. We might speculate here about the exact nature of these teachings. Something more than just observance of Jewish kosher laws seems to be involved here.

[3 : 32] Nor does this seem to be like the situation Paul tackled in Corinth, a matter of eating food sacrificed to idols. Paul had already made his views on that matter clear. Considering the other teachings that seem to have been spread in Ephesus, it may be that what Paul was dealing with here was a sort of Hellenised Jewish asceticism.

A form of asceticism based upon Jewish myths that had developed within a Greek cultural context. Perhaps they looked back to the pre-fall state, prior to man's eating of meat, and prior to a situation where men and women had sexual relations.

Or perhaps the teaching was developed in the context of the new creation, where there would no longer be marriage or giving in marriage, and where meat-eating would presumably cease. Paul addresses these issues by alluding back to the book of Genesis and the teaching there.

In Genesis chapter 1 verse 29, for instance, man was given the privilege of eating of every tree and of every plant. And in Genesis chapter 9 verse 3, man was explicitly given the right to eat of the animals too.

The foods were created by God, and they were created to be received with thanksgiving. An appropriate response to God's good gifts is to enjoy them and give thanks. In Romans chapter 14 verse 14, Paul makes clear that he does not believe that anything created by God is unclean in itself.

[4 : 49] I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. This is why reception of these gifts needs to be with belief, with knowledge of the truth, and with thanksgiving.

If things can't be received in that manner, they aren't being received as gifts and can't be properly enjoyed. The statement that all of these things are good, again alludes back to Genesis chapter 1 verse 31.

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. Creation can be misused. It can be used in a way that's not of faith, or in knowledge of the truth. It can also be used in an ungrateful manner.

God's good gifts can be perverted and wrongly received, and where they are being perverted or misused in such a manner, we must abstain. However, the gifts as given by God are good things, and any suggestion that abstinence from good gifts makes you a holier person should be viewed with great suspicion.

God's good gifts are made holy by the word of God, perhaps this is the word of the gospel, or perhaps the word of Christ by which all things were declared clean, or perhaps the word of the scripture more generally, or maybe something else.

[5 : 58] Prayer is also mentioned here, prayer presumably thanksgiving. Perhaps prayers at mealtimes are particularly in view here. Timothy needs to instruct the Ephesians in these matters. It is in such a manner that he will acquit himself well as a servant of Christ Jesus, demonstrating his knowledge of the content of the Christian faith, and of the good and sound doctrine that stands opposed to the false teaching of the opponents in Ephesus.

Once again, he is warned against the irreverent, silly myths. The myths in question are not godly, and Paul also regards them as fundamentally theologically unserious, unworthy of regard.

He more literally characterises them as old women's fables, the sort of superstitious legends that will be spread by people without training in the law. As an alternative to this, Timothy must train himself for godliness.

Athletic imagery is introduced at this point, and Paul fills it out by contrasting godliness with bodily training. The sort of rigorous physical training that an athlete might undergo in preparation for an event has purpose and value, yet its value is exceedingly limited compared to the value of godliness.

Physical training can increase the potential of the body in this life, but godliness prepares us for this life and the life to come. It has value in every way. It deals with the comprehensive character of human existence, not just the physical body.

[7 : 19] Paul underlines this point in verse 9. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. This is a formula that we have already encountered a couple of times in the book. By comparing and contrasting rigorous physical training and training in godliness, Paul encourages Timothy and us to regard godliness as a discipline that we should take every bit as seriously as an athlete takes bodily exercise.

It is something that must become the overriding focus of our lives. We must give ourselves to deliberate practice, not just passively coasting along, but in a determined fashion, devoting ourselves to disciplines that will increase our spiritual capacity.

The Christian's existence must be a lifelong growth in the practice of discipleship, learning the disciplines of prayer, of the reading of the scriptures, of the works of mercy, of integrity in speech and practice, of service within the body of Christ.

Filling out Paul's analogy, we might think of the church as a spiritual gymnasium, where many people are training together, pushing each other to greater heights, training each other in the disciplines by which they will increase their strength.

The good pastor should be like a coach, training Christians in spiritual disciplines, encouraging and exhorting them to keep on going, providing them with an example to aspire to, and holding them accountable for failure.

[8 : 36] Paul teaches that all of this is done because we have set our hope on the living God. The living God is the source of life, and committing ourselves to godliness is something that we do because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the source of our present life and our life in the age to come.

Paul speaks of God as the saviour of all people, especially of those who believe. Here our minds should be drawn back to 1 Timothy chapter 2 verses 3 and 4. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our saviour, who desires all people to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

By speaking of God as the saviour of all people, Paul is likely referring to the comprehensive character of God's salvation. It addresses the situation of the whole world. It is offered to every single person.

The statement that follows, however, qualifies it, particularly of those who believe. It is by belief that this general salvation is received. While God's salvation is addressed to all mankind, it is only those who receive Christ by faith that actually enjoy it.

Nevertheless, there are numerous blessings of Christ's rule that are enjoyed even by those who never respond to the gospel. Paul charges Timothy to command and to teach these things.

[9 : 49] In commanding, he would lay them down as authoritative teaching that must order the life of the church. In teaching them, he would explain the rationale, and he would instruct people in how to understand them.

Timothy's confidence might have been shaken by the fact that he was relatively young, being sent as Paul's representative to a church where there would be many people who are older than him. This is one of the junctures in the book of 1 Timothy, where the question of when the book was written is of some consequence.

If the book of 1 Timothy was written in the window of time of Acts chapter 20 verses 1 to 3, then Timothy may have been in his early 20s. If it was written after Paul's Roman imprisonment at the end of the book of Acts, then Timothy would likely have been at least in his mid-30s.

We see a similar statement in 1 Corinthians chapter 16 verses 10 to 11. When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am.

So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers. Timothy is instructed to provide an example to the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.

[10 : 58] In his speech, he would need to show wisdom and mastery. In his conduct, he would need to show the integrity between the message that he declared and the actions that he performed.

In love, he would show his devotion to Christ and to his people. In faith, he would demonstrate his confidence in the word and person of Christ. And in purity, his chaste behaviour, particularly towards women.

Perhaps in the purity, we also have another reference to the integrity that he needs to show. In 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 17, Paul describes Timothy as his son, who represents his own character.

Paul imitates Christ, he calls the Corinthians to imitate him, and he gives them Timothy, who has imitated him. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

As a good leader, Timothy needs to lead by example. He needs to be an exemplar of the sort of behaviour that the Christian needs to exhibit. To this end, until Paul returns, Timothy is instructed to devote himself to the public reading of scripture.

[12 : 03] This is the fundamental practice of the church, the corporate reading of the scripture and study of it. That leads then to the practice of exhortation, that takes the word of the scripture and gives it an imperative force in the life of the congregation.

And then the second practice of teaching, by which people are instructed, so that they might better understand what they hear in the public reading of the scripture. Timothy had received a gift, by which he would be better able to perform the ministry that had been given to him.

The gift here is associated with an act of prophecy, and also with the laying on of hands. Elsewhere, in 2 Timothy chapter 1 verse 6, we read of another event of laying on of hands, when Paul laid hands on Timothy.

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. Whether these were two different events of the laying on of hands, or the same one, is not immediately clear.

I believe it is most likely that the laying on of the hands of the elders might have been the Ephesian house church leaders appointing Timothy to act in a temporary overseer role over them, while Paul's laying of his hands on Timothy was appointing Timothy to act as his apostolic, plenipotentiary emissary.

[13 : 13] Timothy has been authorised to perform a mission. He has also presumably been empowered by the spirit, and exhorted and encouraged by a prophecy given concerning him. He must devote himself to performing what he has been given.

It is only in performing such a vocation that the gift will actually be enjoyed and be rendered effective. To do this, like the effective athlete, he must continually practice these things.

He must immerse himself in them. It must become his entire world. It must be what he lives and breathes every single day. As he does this, he will be a more effective example. People will see the progress that he is making, and he will thereby inspire them to make progress in their own Christian lives.

Timothy's primary focus must be keeping watch upon himself. By keeping watch upon himself and by practising his own Christian life, he will be the most effective leader that he can be.

In many ways, the most effective shepherd of a community is the person who watches more closely over himself than over anyone else. He masters himself and sets an example for others thereby.

[14 : 14] He sets the tone for the entire community. Leadership will always be a lot easier when you are giving people something worth following, and the man who is keeping close watch over himself will be in the best position to do this.

Likewise, he also needs to be diligent and watchful over what he is teaching. It is the truth that he lives and teaches that will be effective in saving himself and the various people to whom he ministers.

A question to consider. How might Paul's analogy between the Christian life and athletic training inform our models and our practices of Christian discipleship?