

Servants of the Word

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 0 0] Well, we are coming back to Paul's first letter to Timothy, who's writing to his younger and faithful pastoral colleague. He calls him his true son in the faith. And perhaps as we've gone through, you've sensed the change in tone in this letter if you've been here through our series.

We're now into the second half of this letter. Now, in the first half, much of what Paul said was generally how we as a church are to live together and conduct ourselves. Chapter one was the introduction, setting the scene, laying down the foundation. From chapter two up until the end of chapter three, he switched into what we could call the passive voice to give broad-brush general instructions. So remember this, I urge that petitions, prayer, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made.

The overseer is to be. Deacons are to be. I want the men to. I want the women to. It's almost quite an impersonal letter, isn't it? It just reads a little bit like an instruction manual, because the first half of the letter is really Paul just getting down on paper what he would be doing if he was there. But he's not there. He can't be there. And so he's simply teaching Timothy how the church in all times and places is to operate. Last time in this letter, we saw three verses 14 to 16, the kind of the mountaintop, the climax of the letter, because they lead us to the gospel of Christ himself. That is what all of this revolves around as a church.

But from the start of chapter four, Paul's spoken very directly to Timothy himself about personally what he needs to know, how he needs to operate. I wonder if you noticed as we've read how many instructions Paul gives to not the church, but Timothy in those verses. Eight verses, I counted 12 instructions at command. Teach. Don't let. Set an example. Devote yourself. Do not neglect.

Be diligent. Give yourself. Watch. Persevere. Do not rebuke. Treat the church in these ways. It's a long list, isn't it? In a short few verses. This is how Timothy is to operate in the church. And not only Timothy, but every minister or servant of the word. Now, a few weeks ago, we thought about two New Testament offices or roles of elder and deacon. And I mentioned at the time, I'm sure you haven't forgotten this, okay, that some people see two and a half offices in the New Testament. Now, I know this has been keeping you awake at night. You've been dying to know what this half an office might be. Well, the wait is over.

[3 : 09] Here it is. Because Timothy was an elder, but he was specifically set apart to be a minister or teaching elder. Let's see that verse 14. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you. So, Paul's describing Timothy's ordination as a minister, the gift given to carry out the call, verse 13, to read, preach, and teach the scriptures. And so, from this, we get the New Testament office of an ordained or set-apart ministry of the word. Now, some would say there's just two kinds of elder. And that is true insofar as a minister is an elder, okay? A minister isn't set above the elders in some kind of hierarchy, nothing like that. But in our tradition, when somebody is ordained to ministry, even if he is an elder, he is still ordained by the laying on of hands, set apart to serve the church by preaching and teaching. So, that's where two and a half comes from, okay? It's not completely two. It's definitely not three, okay? But I find that personally a helpful way to think about it. Because a minister is an elder set aside specifically to be a servant of the word. So, that's what we're thinking about this evening, the ministry of the word, servants of the word. And perhaps you're wondering then, why couldn't I have just studied this passage and preached you something different tonight?

Okay, why do we as a church need to hear this? Well, Paul remembers writing an open letter to the church, the very last verse of the letter, grace be with you all. So, this is still something that Paul wants the whole church to hear. So, to kind of front load the application, okay, I want to just mention two ways that this sermon can help you as a Christian and us as a church as we listen tonight. Firstly, as we hear this, it can help you please to know how to pray for ministers. Okay, ministers need to be prayed for. No Christian is above needing the prayers of their fellow Christians. And I hope as we look at this tonight, you'll see just how much ministers need and crave the prayers of the church. So, application one, as you listen, please pray for your minister and ministers throughout our city, throughout our presbytery, throughout our nations, throughout the world in these ways. Okay, there are always specific personal prayer requests that we have for each other. But these things are things that ministers need prayer for all the time.

Okay, so if you want to know how you can pray for me, come back to these verses, please. These would be wonderful prayers. Secondly, though, it can help us as a church to prepare to train ministers in the future.

Now, I sent out some more info this week if you got the email about a new partnership that we have presented into with five other local churches, Northeast Scotland Gospel Trust. And the number one purpose of that partnership is training new gospel workers. So, together, we are setting up a ministry training academy in Aberdeen with the hope that in the coming years, this whole region in the Northeast of Scotland would be served with more faithful gospel preaching and teaching. There was a website linked.

Do have a look. It's ministrytraining.scot. You can find out there maybe how to pray better for this. For us at Bon Accord, this goes hand in glove, really, with the training strategy that was adopted by the free church earlier this year that really gives a big and important role to congregations like ours in training up the next generation of ministers. Nobody else is going to do this. It is going to be local congregations who identify and train and raise up new gospel workers, which means that we, as a church at Bon Accord, we need to know what faithful ministry is if we are to identify and help train men and women for various kinds of gospel work, and men in particular for ordained gospel work.

[8 : 00] And so, if at any point, okay, in the next half an hour, you find yourself zoning out, dropping off, not sure where we are, okay, let me encourage you to ask these questions. How can I pray this for my minister, for ministers, and how can we as a congregation help prepare people for this kind of gospel ministry? Okay, two questions. And Paul gives us four C's to think about. He instructs Timothy in his character, in competence, in his convictions, and then he gives Timothy a context that he is to work in.

So, let's start, firstly, with Timothy's character as a minister. Just glance down, if you would, at verse 12, where Paul writes, command and teach these things. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.

Now, we've seen throughout this letter the importance of character and integrity in the life of the church, and specifically church leaders. We saw with the two offices of elder and deacon that as far as Paul is concerned, who an elder or deacon is, is far more important than what an elder or a deacon does.

And that is true of ministers also. Robert Murray McShane, he was a minister in the 1800s. He famously said this of his congregation, the greatest need of my people is my personal holiness.

I don't know what you think of that. I don't think that's necessarily true. Our greatest need is Christ, isn't it? And as John the Baptist put it nicely, I am not the Christ. Okay, ministers do well to remember that. But if we rephrase that question, what do you need most from your minister? What do you need most from me? Well, then McShane's answer is right, isn't it? What a church needs most from her minister is his personal holiness. Now, I tremble to say that. And that is a hard thing to say from the pulpit, because I know my heart. Okay, I can say with Paul, I am a sinner and the chief of sinners.

[10 : 33] And as tempting as it is to kind of rush on past this point, it is necessary to say, isn't it, that Christ-likeness is so important in ministry. And for lack of that, it can be devastating.

Moral failure in ministry can ruin churches. It can break families. It can wreck lives. Rightly or wrongly, it can cause people to walk away from Christ. Perhaps worst of all, it brings shame on the name of Christ when his ministers fail him in huge ways morally.

Some of you, I know, have listened to the rise and fall of Mars Hill since I mentioned that last. And you have heard as you've listened to that, that unfold in the life of a church and the chaos that it caused. Perhaps some of you have even lived through that yourselves in a church.

Because in the way when a minister speaks or behaves wrongly in an un-Christ-like way, or in the inner life of love, of faith, and purity in heart, when he doesn't set a godly example and doesn't repent of that when he's not doing that, well, in time, the result is that the church no longer looks or feels like God's household, the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. Why is that? Well, it is because a minister is sent by Christ to speak on his behalf.

And so, if a minister is not in line with Christ and his character, well, people will not see and hear Christ in his speech and in his conduct.

[12 : 25] And as we said, what the church needs most is Christ. And so, I do think this is a unique occupational hazard for ministers because of how much they do and say in front of the church. Proverbs 10, verse 19 is true, isn't it?

When words are many, transgression is not lacking. It's a way of saying, the more you say, the more opportunities you have to say it wrong. And so, firstly, I need your prayers in that.

But secondly, it is vital, isn't it then, that in identifying and training new ministers, that character comes first.

I've personally been really encouraged over the past year to see the way that our church, the Free Church of Scotland, handles applications for ministry, that this really is top of the list of things to consider of new ministers, is character, whether to move forward or to press pause, hangs on that question, really.

Who is this guy? What is his character? That also needs to be true in the way that we maybe identify possible trainees further down the line. What else might we be tempted to look for or to ask for of future ministers or of ministers?

[13 : 52] Well, clearly, back then, there was a premium of age or experience. I think that can be true in parts of the church today. Paul's really aware, isn't he, that Timothy is being looked down on in the church, verse 12, because he's young.

And Paul says, don't let them do that. To be clear, he's not saying, kind of, stick up for yourself. He's saying, no, Timothy, you don't have to prove yourself to anyone by your age or experience.

Just don't buy into that measure of your worth. As a minister, don't seek human praise. Or try to live up to human requirements. Instead of that, prove yourself by Christ-likeness and character.

Now, Timothy, despite being young, probably had a few years on me. People reckon he was maybe in his mid-30s. But if they look down on Timothy, imagine the reception that I would have got in Ephesus.

Don't imagine I would have been particularly welcome. I'm so thankful, therefore, that this hasn't been the case here in Bon Accord. Let me say how personally thankful I am to ye and to God for the warmth, the call, the welcome that ye have given me and my family in bringing us here to serve ye.

[15 : 17] It has been incredible. I'm personally so thankful for that. But as a servant of the word, I'm even more thankful because of what that says about you.

that what you want from your minister is what Christ wants of his ministers rather than what worldly wisdom says that a minister should be.

And your love for God and your love for his word mean more to me, much more to me as your minister than even the personal joy I have in being your minister, if I can put it that way.

Lord willing, there will be younger men than me preaching from this pulpit in the years to come. So let us not forget then that it is character that counts and not the length of a guy's CV.

But while character comes first, it's clearly not the only requirement, is it, for being a servant of the word? Because secondly, Paul writes, verse 13, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.

[16 : 27] So secondly, then there's a competency that comes with fulfilling this call to ministry. That's one reason, another reason. I see two and a half offices here rather than kind of simply two, because while we saw elders need generally to be able to teach, well, Paul is crystal clear that ministers must preach.

There's a difference there, isn't there? To put it really simply, an elder doesn't have to preach, but a minister does. In fact, being a minister and being a preacher is so closely tied together in our tradition that when a church, when the church approves a new minister, we literally call it licensing him to preach the gospel.

And even then, that guy isn't set apart to word ministry until he is the minister of a congregation. The reason being, the church doesn't just want random ministers floating about the place without being tethered to a pulpit.

To be a minister is to be a servant of the word, a preacher of the gospel. Now, for Timothy, of course, that's really significant, because remember, what he's in Ephesus to counter is false teaching, controversial speculation.

So the front line for Timothy in the church is the pulpit. And he's not to kind of fight against these speculations with his own good ideas or his own clever arguments.

[17 : 59] He is to push back against the false teaching by doing what? Reading the Bible. Reading the Bible. Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture.

Brothers and sisters, when the Bible is opened and read in our services, what do we think is happening? What are we expecting to hear? Friends, God is speaking.

Do we think that the reading of the Bible is just what has to happen before we hear a sermon? No. When the Bible is open, God is speaking to us. And that is so vital.

That is why we keep our Bibles open during the sermon. Because the alternative to reading the Bible, the alternative to looking at what it says as I'm preaching, is my random human thoughts, which you do not need and you do not want and are not good.

Okay, this book, the Bible, is what stands between us being blown about like autumn leaves by every wind of doctrine and God's word.

[19 : 12] Okay, that is why I ask you to please do that, to check what I'm saying. You need to know that what I'm saying is what the passage is saying. And when you think it's not, that you come and tell me that.

Because this is about God speaking, not what I have to say. That's clearly what Paul kind of had in mind in this context, isn't it? They didn't have copies of the Bible back then to open.

But the idea is clearly that Timothy would get up, read scripture, and then preach that scripture and teach that scripture. And if that is the competency that Timothy needed to fulfill his calling, then that has real implications, doesn't it, for your minister and for us as a church?

So for me personally, this was maybe helpful to outline. This is what dictates my diary. Okay, if preaching is the most important thing that I do, then it needs time, and it needs my best time.

So I block off, in general, mornings, every morning of my week, to devote to preaching and teaching. Sometimes it spills over into other times as well.

[20 : 27] But I try to give it the time that it deserves. To give you an idea, it's roughly 10 to 12 hours for each sermon. Sometimes a wee bit more, depending on the passage or the book.

And naturally, that means me not being able to do as much of, or as well, the things that I would enjoy to do, as well as preaching the word.

There are things that are sacrificed as a result. But Paul instructs ministers, doesn't he, to devote themselves to the reading, the preaching, and the teaching of scripture.

It also means that I need to be able to work at it, to go to conferences, to talk to people, to study, to read books, to train in preaching God's word.

Okay, see that? This verse 15, be diligent in these matters. Give yourself wholly to them so that everyone may see your progress. Okay, I hope you knew when I came here that you didn't get the finished article.

[21 : 33] I hope you know that by now. I think you do. But Paul also wants us to know that even if I were to preach for the next 50 years, okay, I would still not be the finished product.

I would still have progress to make. He expects Timothy to grow more and more competent in preaching and teaching. And that takes hard work. There's an organization that does this called 2 Timothy 4, training preachers.

And their tagline is, every preacher can be a better preacher. Every preacher can be a better preacher. I don't know what you think of that. But I don't know any faithful preacher who would disagree with that.

So again, please, if you're praying for me, pray for me in this way. It sounds like a really boring prayer request. But as those who have done it know, preaching the text and not what I think the text says or what I want the text to say is a serious challenge.

And it's a daily discipline in my week. I'd appreciate your prayer. And first as a church, what does this mean? Competency in preaching and teaching.

[22 : 49] Well, some ministers get really hung up on people listening to their sermons because of how much work it takes. Okay, that is human pride speaking. That is not a good reason to listen to somebody's sermons.

The value of God's word and the place that God has given preaching commends careful listening in its own right.

Okay, that is we listen to God's word being read and preached not because of who the preacher is, but because of what it is that is being preached.

When the queen was crowned in 1953, the moderator of the Church of Scotland presented her with a Bible. And picture, if you would, the queen sitting on her throne, okay, flowing robes, precious jewels, the crown upon her head.

And he said these words, our gracious queen, to keep your majesty ever mindful of the law and the gospel of God as the rule for the whole of life and government of Christian rulers.

[23 : 57] We present you with this book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is wisdom. This is the royal law.

These are the lively oracles of God. The most valuable thing this world affords was not upon the throne, but held in his hands, scripture.

Should we not therefore treasure the reading, the preaching, the teaching of this book above all things? If Sunday is the highlight of the Christian week, then surely the reading and the preaching of scripture is the highlight of that day.

Not again, again, not for the sake of the preacher, but for the sake of what is preached, that these are words that have been breathed out of God's mouth to us, to our church, into our hearts by his spirit.

Reading, preaching, teaching scripture then is the main competency of ministers. And thirdly, Timothy is to do this with sharp convictions, verse 16.

[25 : 11] Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them. Now, interesting, isn't it? Both these things need careful vigilance, life and doctrine.

I studied theology for three years. Before that, I trained for two years in Bible teaching. After those five years, I felt like I'd had a pretty good foundation in understanding the Bible and theology, and yet, I still have much to learn, and I am chastened by the thought that there are people who have known much more than me, studied far longer, who have written some of the books that I've read, who have done degrees, who have many letters after their names, who have not watched their doctrine closely, and who have come off the rails further down the line.

How does that happen? Well, God's truth doesn't change, does it? But we change. I don't know if you think of yourself as a theologian, but the late minister and writer, R.C. Sproul, wrote a book called Everyone's a Theologian.

Did you know that? You are a theologian. What did he mean? His point is we all operate with a theology of our own. How we think of God, how we think of the Christian life, how we think of the church, that is all theology.

You are a theologian. And so week by week, our theology is either developing, growing, sharpening, strengthening, or it is degenerating and shrinking and dulling and weakening.

[26 : 50] Why? Because our hearts and minds are not static, and the world that we live in is constantly changing. And so for our doctrine, our belief to stay steady, it's a little bit like if you've ever seen a fish swimming upstream and just to stay in the same place, it has to swim hard against the current simply to stay still.

So to stay put, well, we have to stay active. That's what Paul's instructing Timothy to do. Keep watch over his doctrine actively, constantly, to ensure his heart isn't shifting from the truth.

He is to know what he believes and what he is to teach. He's to have firm convictions that keep his theology, his life, rooted in place. He should know what to ask himself about what he is thinking, about what he is preaching.

Is my faith focused on the gospel? Or am I dwelling too much on other things? Have I neglected to teach this? Have I put too much stress on this other thing?

These core biblical convictions give us key questions to ask ourselves, to check that we are on the right path. That goes for life, doesn't it, as much as doctrine.

[28 : 06] The two go hand in hand. In fact, it's hard to go wrong in life without also going wrong in doctrine and vice versa. I guess it is perfectly possible, isn't it, to be orthodox in everything that you think and still go wrong in life.

But that is doctrine without conviction. It is lifeless doctrine. And so Timothy needs strong biblical convictions. It's vital because ministry is often an exercise in acting on the courage of your convictions, doing and saying things not because it is the easiest for you to do and say or necessarily because it is what everyone wants you to do or wants to hear but because you know that it is right by God's word.

Without those biblical convictions, ministers end up simply taking the path of least resistance. But Paul's so clear that that is not good enough because look at what's at stake, verse 16, in gospel ministry.

Persevere in them. That is life and doctrine because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. To be clear, I can't save anyone.

God alone saves. But he saves by his word, by the gospel. And so if the guy that you are supposed to hear the gospel from is getting gospel living wrong or getting gospel teaching wrong, you're not going to be getting the gospel clearly.

[29 : 40] That's the great danger, isn't it? In Ephesus, the false teachers are not giving people the gospel. They're giving people speculation, their own random thoughts. But God has chosen only to save through the gospel of Christ.

And so if the minister keeps going with that, perseveres in it, he will be saved and those who hear will be saved. If he doesn't, he won't and they won't.

And so, friends, what your minister believes is of eternal importance. Please, would you remind him that sometimes? And this is why I need to keep going.

This is why we need our seminary to work well in Edinburgh. It's why we need our churches to work well in identifying and training gospel workers, ministers for the future. Because theology, preaching, it cannot simply be an interesting academic lesson.

Eternal life depends upon it. Character, competence, conviction. And finally, and very briefly, Paul gives Timothy a context in which to do this.

[30 : 53] The context, God's household, the church. If you just glance down at with me chapter 5, verses 1 and 2. It says, do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him.

Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters with absolute purity. The church is a family. Paul doesn't let us forget that, does he?

He doesn't ever want Timothy to forget it. And in the way that he treats people, the congregation in Ephesus, people who clearly weren't that thrilled that he was there in the first place, what he is to treat them as his own family, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters.

Relate to older men as you would a father, he says. You can't be as direct, as blunt with them as you can your younger brothers. Treat women as mothers, as sisters, that is with complete purity on your part.

Remember, this is God's family. Speak to the church as his family, as your family because, Timothy, you are a servant in God's household.

[32 : 08] Let me say how delighted I am that that is my, our experience here, that it feels like a family. That is wonderful news because we are a family, the family of God.

And so, brothers and sisters, finally, please don't forget the context in which this word ministry is to happen. God's family home. This is not an echo chamber of ideas.

It is not a bubble closed off from the world. No, God is growing a family here. He is building up bonds of love together. He is bringing people into the family.

And he is doing it by his word. Read, studied, preached, taught, heard, believed. May it always be so here at Bon Accord and, indeed, wherever his word is faithfully taught.

Let's pray together as we close. razem donku it always tak Yup beans we enjoyed opening ,■■■oya page