

What was the epitaph, the commendation, that Paul wanted Timothy to deserve when he came to the end of his ministry? What are the words we long to hear from the Lord Jesus Christ when we appear before his judgment seat? Surely they are “Well done, good and faithful servant”!

What makes a minister good? Paul, in the passage we come to in 1 Timothy this morning, tells Timothy three things that it takes to become a good minister: good teaching (v.6), godly training (vv. 7-9) and a global task (v.10). Good teaching, godly training, and a global task are not exclusively for ministers, however. Paul hints at this when, in verse 6, he refers to Timothy, not as a minister (although that is how the NIV translates it), but as a good “servant” or “deacon” (diakonos) of Christ. A deacon is simply a servant, and “servant” is a word that ought to describe every minister. But of course servanthood is not just for ministers. Any Christian who puts these verses into practice is a good servant of Jesus Christ.

1. Good Teaching (v.6)

If Timothy is to be a good minister he must “point out these things” to the church, God’s family at Ephesus. “These things” refers both to the opening verses of chapter 4, in which, you will remember, the Holy Spirit explained where bad theology comes from, and to the whole teaching of the letter up to this point. He needs to teach them in such a way that people can grasp them clearly for themselves and feel confident about putting them into practice in their own lives. Such teaching will involve setting forth biblical truth but also opposing false doctrine. The latter can be a thankless task. Most Christians desire to have the truth explained, but not all are willing to have error exposed. If a minister says, “Jesus is the way to salvation”, all the people say “Amen!” But if he says, “Jesus is the only way to salvation”, and then proceeds to deny the saving power of other religions, that is bound to stir up some controversy. In all his activity and service for others, the Christian minister must remember that he is serving Jesus Christ first of all and that his primary aim must be to be pleasing him. Indeed, every Christian should seek to please God rather than men.

Timothy had been “brought up” (or nourished) “in the truths of the faith”. He had had a godly upbringing in the truths of Scripture from his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois (2 Timothy 1:5). He had also learned to follow these truths by putting them into practice in his life. His upbringing also included the theological training that he received from the apostle Paul. The “good teaching” is the apostolic doctrine about Jesus Christ learnt during his internship with Paul. A good upbringing, however, is only the beginning. Being trained in the faith is for a whole lifetime. Since the Greek verb for “brought up” (or trained) is in the present tense, the implication is that Timothy continues to be trained in biblical truth. The best Bible teachers never lose their passion for the study of God’s Word. Every good servant of Christ draws continual nourishment from the Word of God. What about you? Is that true of you?

2. Godly Training (vv.7-9)

But the deep religious truths taught in the Bible are to be distinguished from “godless myths and old wives’ tales”. At the beginning of the letter Paul had spoken out against the false teachers in Ephesus who were devoting “themselves to myths and endless genealogies”. These “godless myths” may refer to the gods and goddesses of pagan mythology or to Jewish fables about the lives of Old Testament saints. And “old wives’ tales” are superstitious beliefs – any kind of folk wisdom that smacks of superstition. There is only one wise and safe response to such things – total rejection. The general principle is that good Christians, and especially good ministers, do not speculate about matters not taught in Scripture. They do not allow controversies in politics, sport, education, or even religion to distract them from solid biblical truth.

Instead of wasting time with idle speculation, Christians must train themselves to be godly. It takes godly training as well as godly teaching to make a good minister. Of all the things Paul wanted to say to Timothy, “train yourself to be godly” (“for godliness”) must have been the most important. The word “godliness” occurs 15 times in the New Testament, but 9 of them are in this letter. If someone had asked Timothy what Paul’s letter was about, he might well have said, “Well, I suppose it was mostly about the life in God’s household, but the thing that impressed me was my personal need for godliness”. The word “godliness” means reverence – it denotes the respect that the believer owes to

(1 Timothy 4:6-10; Psalm 16:1-11; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

God. Such godliness comes from the awareness that all of life is lived before the face of God. The godly person places God at the centre of every activity and endeavour – at home, at work, at study, at church and at play. It is the attitude toward life that David expressed when he said, “I have set the Lord always before me” (Psalm 16:8). Godliness comes from a God-centred life. Above all else, God wants his ministers and his people to be godly. And so Paul gave Timothy the most practical instruction of all: a good minister is a godly minister.

A good illustration of the importance of godliness comes from the ministry of Lorne Sanny, who formerly served as president of the Navigators. One Sunday morning, a woman in Sanny’s church discovered that she had a flat tyre. As soon as he noticed her difficulty, Sanny stripped off his coat and tie to change tyres for her. He later discovered that this single act of kindness was remembered long after all the sermons he preached in that church had been forgotten. Actions do not always speak louder than words, but they do have a way of turning up the volume. Sanny’s life confirmed the truth of his doctrine.

Godliness does not happen automatically. It requires difficult, diligent training. In this respect, taking care of the soul is much like taking care of the body. Paul made this connection when he told Timothy, “physical training is of some value”. Paul seems to have had a real interest in sports, for his letters contain references to boxing, wrestling, track and field and various kinds of athletics. Paul knew, therefore, that great athletes are made, and not just born. Most Olympians have extraordinary natural abilities, but they also make a total life commitment to improving their speed, strength and athletic technique. Many years of strenuous daily training is required.

If such thorough training is necessary for the body, why should the soul be any different? We must do our spiritual exercises. We must train ourselves to be godly. When it comes to physical conditioning, it usually helps to have a trainer. Personal trainers are popular these days. The trainer’s job is to set up a schedule of exercises to get the client into shape. There is a sense in which every Christian has a personal trainer: namely the Holy Spirit, speaking in the Bible. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God to produce the life of God in the soul. What makes people godly is reading, hearing, studying and meditating on the Bible. As John Stott points out “We cannot become familiar with this godly book without becoming godly ourselves”. The Word of God itself suggests many other ways to get spiritual exercise, starting with prayer. Prayer is the God-centred conversation that fuels the God-centred life. With prayer goes fasting, which is perhaps the most neglected of spiritual disciplines. But fasting strengthens the work of prayer and reminds the Christian of his or her utter dependence on God for life and strength. Another good form of spiritual exercise is partaking in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The bread and the wine are nourishment for the Christian life. Then there are tithes and offerings, which are exercises in generosity, and also deeds of mercy such as feeding and clothing the homeless, welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick and the prisoner and helping the aged. The result of all this godly training will be a godly life. By themselves, acts of Christian devotion do not guarantee godliness, which is a matter of the heart. But Bible reading, prayer, the sacraments, and deeds of mercy are the drills that God has appointed for our spiritual training. By faith and the Holy Spirit, these spiritual exercises produce spiritual fruit.

For all their similarities, there is one great difference between training the body and training the soul: “For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (v.8). Physical exercise has its place. As someone who was more dependent than most on a strong physical constitution for carrying out his missionary work, Paul must have come to recognise the value of physical fitness. It is good to have a healthy body, and thus it is appropriate for Christians to exercise regularly and to play sports. But bodily exercise has value only for this life, not for the life to come. All the benefits of physical training expire at death. Godliness, on the other hand, “has value for all things“ or “is valuable in every way” (NRSV). It is valuable in the home, in the market place and in the church. It guides the believer in every situation. As useful as it is for present life, godliness holds even more promise for the future. Christians have the best of both worlds. When it comes to Christian character, you really can take it with you! Godliness is the one thing a person can take from this life to the next. It lasts forever. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul said, “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever” (1 Corinthians 9:25).

Not every athlete who trains for the Olympics wins a medal. But everyone who trains to be godly will gain an eternal crown of glory.

In verse 9 Paul refers to “a trustworthy saying”, the third of the faithful sayings in his pastoral letters (1 Timothy 1:15, 3:1, 2 Timothy 2:11, Titus 3:8). It is uncertain whether this saying should go with v. 8, in which case it closes that paragraph, or (as in the NIV) with v.10, in which case it opens a new paragraph.

3. The Global Task (v.10)

Mentioning eternal life leads Paul to remind Timothy why he entered ministry in the first place: “(and for this we labour and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe” (v.10). The final thing it takes to become a good servant of Christ is commitment to the global task of world evangelization. This verse explains what Christian ministry is all about. It is honest about the difficulty of ministry. The work of the gospel is a struggle. It is full of toil and strife. The English word “agony” comes from the Greek word for “striving” (agonizomai) – a term that continues the idea of strenuous training and hints at the sufferings of ministry. But all this work is worth the effort. “No pain, no gain” was one of Paul’s principles for effective ministry.

Paul and Timothy received the saving message of salvation in Jesus Christ for themselves when they set their hope on the living God. Every believer has this same hope. We know that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and is seated at the right hand of God the Father. We know that God will save us on the day of judgment. Having this assurance, we make every possible effort to share that message with everyone else. We labour and strive to see men, women and children receive eternal life. We have a burden for the global task of saving the lost. Evangelism lies at the heart of every truly Christian ministry. The church will not rest until every person on earth has heard the good news of salvation from sin and deliverance from death offered to all by the living God through Jesus Christ his Son.

The living God, the God of hope, is at the same time the one “who is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe”. “Saviour” and “salvation” are words that can sometimes denote physical safety and the preservation of life. The verb “to save” is sometimes used for the healing miracles of Jesus and the apostles (Luke 18:42; Acts 14:9). Because of the comparison (“especially”) here with those who believe, “Saviour” here must refer to something other than eternal salvation since there are no degrees of such salvation – a person is either saved or not. God as the Saviour must mean that he is rich in mercy to all sorts of people, preserving their lives and blessing them with food and gladness (Acts 14:17). This confession of God’s care for the whole human family is an example of what is called God’s common grace. He does not give the gifts of salvation to everyone, but he does show to everyone some measure of his kindness in the course of everyday life. Men and women are totally undeserving of this kindness because of their sin, which is why it must be called grace. Unlike God’s saving grace, his common grace falls short of actually bestowing on people the gift of eternal life. Yet it is such a definite and clear witness to God’s existence, sovereignty and goodness, that it is inexcusable for anyone to fail to be thankful to him, or to fail to worship and serve him.

God’s providential care is true “especially of those who believe”, because their relationship to God rests on an entirely different footing to that of unbelievers. Believers are children of the covenant and members of the family of God in Christ. For them God works everything together for good in his loving and eternal purpose (Romans 8:28). God is their Father, Christ is their Brother, the Holy Spirit is their Sanctifier, and God’s infallible providence surrounds and keeps them. No-one is nor could be more secure or cared for than believers.

Salvation from sin comes by grace through faith. If you do not believe in Jesus, then you are not saved. Jesus Christ is a Saviour only for those who truly believe. Faith in Christ can be compared to the sinner’s passport to heaven. The only acceptable passport to heaven is faith in Jesus Christ. On the day when every person who ever lived is gathered before the judgment seat of God, your only hope is to have the proper passport – one that is given to you by the Holy Spirit who gave you the gift

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of faith, that is embossed with the cross where Christ died for your sins, and that has your name and picture inside it because you have set your hope in the living God. Do you have such a passport?

Amen

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