

Instructions Concerning False Teachers

Studies in 1 Timothy 4

A verse by verse study of the book of 1st Timothy

Early in its history, the church learned that wherever the truth of Christ was proclaimed, the voices of error soon followed close behind. The Apostle Paul was an aged man. Timothy was a younger preacher overseeing the church at Ephesus (on the west coast of present-day Turkey). Timothy was instructed in this chapter to fight against various kinds of error by godly living, faithful teaching, and rigid self-discipline.

1. Stand Firmly Against Apostasy (4:1-5)

The Holy Spirit reveals “that in the latter times, some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils” (4:1). All through the church age, there would be those who depart from the faith.

The word “expressly” means “in clear terms.” There is no vagueness about the fact that departures from the faith will be evident. The word “depart” is a translation of the Greek word “apostasia”—which means “to fall away” or “to defect from the faith.” Apostasy is not the same as ignorance; apostasy is not a lack of knowledge. Apostasy is a deliberate rejection of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith; apostasy is willful departure, deliberately forsaking the truth of the Gospel. Apostasy is an extremely dangerous action because it is sinning against better knowledge.

The reference to “seducing spirits and doctrines of devils” is a reminder that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the spirit hosts of wickedness (Ephesians 6:12). We are constantly in a spiritual warfare, and we must never underestimate the power of the enemy.

The apostate leaders “speak lies in hypocrisy” (4:2). They try and hide their true identity; they use the vocabulary of the evangelical believer, but they do not use the same dictionary. They know the Word of God and understand its teachings, but their consciences have been “seared with a hot iron.”

Conscience is the faculty within us which demands that we do the right and shun the wrong—but conscience does not give a person the proper concepts of right and wrong. With our wills, we accept a certain standard—a basis for making decisions. For the Roman Catholic, the standard is based on the encyclicals of the Pope; for the person of the world, the standard is based on the opinions of society; for the Christian, the standard is based on the teachings of the Word of God. The conscience is the faculty that reminds us when we fail to keep the standard which we have accepted with our wills.

The word “seared” means that the conscience has become so hardened that it no longer gives true guidance—even about those standards which have been previously accepted. This can happen by repeatedly arguing with the conscience, and stifling its warnings.

Some of the erroneous teachings promoted by false teachers include “forbidding to marry” and “commanding to abstain from certain foods” (4:3). The false cult known as Gnosticism in the early church, taught that **everything pertaining to the body** was inherently evil. Thus marriage must be avoided, and abstaining from certain foods must be practiced. The Gnostics said that the soul lives on in the next world, but the body is evil, and is really just a prison house for the soul.

Refraining from marriage is one of the errors named in (4:3). Some church groups today require celibacy (especially of priests), maintaining that these people can live a holier life if they remain unwed. But the real enemy of the spiritual life is a disobedient heart, not whether one marries or remains celibate. Not to marry is God’s will for some people (1 Corinthians 7:7), but it is the exception rather than the rule.

Abstaining from certain foods is another common error (4:3). Some have carried the Israelite law against eating pork over into the New Testament era. There are vegetarians who think many of man’s problems lie in the eating of meat. Some have ruled that only fish may be eaten on Fridays. Many of us personally don’t care to eat buzzards and eels and groundhogs and grasshoppers. Some try to avoid eating too much salt, and too many sweets and fatty foods. We may have good reasons for not eating certain kinds of foods, but we should not say that the Scriptures require that we abstain. In fact, every creature which God made is good, and thus it need not be refused, “if it is received with thanksgiving” (4:4). Whenever it comes time to partake of meals, we should thank God for the gift of hunger and for the availability of food.

Food and marriage are intended by our Creator for the propagation of the human race and for the sustenance of human life. Food is sanctified in Genesis 9:3, Acts 10:14-15, and 1 Corinthians 10:25-26. Marriage is sanctified in 1 Corinthians 7:1-40 and Hebrews 13:4. To reject what God has purposed for man’s welfare is not a wise thing to do.

2. Exercise Yourself in Godliness (4:6-10)

Spiritual exercise includes engaging in those activities which lead to godliness. This includes practicing the disciplines of the Christian life—Bible study, prayer, witnessing to others, mortifying the deeds of the flesh, etc.

a. The good minister of Jesus Christ is to major on positive teaching, which leads to spiritual nourishment (4:6).

Timothy is to “put the brethren in remembrance” of the things he has been taught, so that they will be “nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine” (4:6). Evil can best be refuted by the positive teaching of Christian truth. God’s people need to be taught and reminded from time to time—about what the Bible says in all areas of doctrine and polity—so that the local church will remain stable, and will keep true to scriptural teachings.

Bible teachers in local churches should systematically teach surveys of each Bible book, and should repeatedly summarize the basic doctrines of the Christian faith, so that every believer will be more

ready to give an answer to those who ask about “the hope that is in us” (1 Peter 3:15). False doctrines must be met with true teachings (the “good doctrine” of verse 6b).

b. The good minister will put energy into keeping himself spiritually fit—described here as “exercise unto godliness” (4:7-8).

The true minister will avoid useless tales like those enjoyed by old women (4:7). The word “profane” means “common” or “silly.” The reference is similar to the caution in 1 Timothy 1:4. It was a common practice among early Christians (especially from a Jewish background) to pass along from generation to generation, legendary stories about Old Testament characters. Also, among Christians, there is a tendency to go off on tangents and engage in hairsplitting discussions about matters that cannot be absolutely settled here in this life with our limited knowledge (1 Corinthians 13:12). The preacher must not fritter away his time with silly religious trivia and with discussions about issues for which there are no clear answers. Instead, he must exercise himself for the purpose of godliness.

Regular physical exercise has some value (4:8). Our sedentary lifestyle and our overabundance of high-calorie food and drink have made exercise programs necessary in the western world. A discipline of regular exercise and of weight control is an important part of the stewardship of our bodies. On the other hand, in some quarters, physical exercise has been made a virtual religion—with priests and temples and liturgies. Many are spending big money on special diets, on exercise equipment, and on membership in health clubs—to offset the thousands of dollars spent on rich foods and on automobiles. We should not ignore physical fitness, but we must be even more careful to guard against becoming spiritually flabby.

Bodily exercise is the “in thing” these days, and physical exercise does help throw off disease and make one feel younger. Just as bodily exercise helps a person ward off some physical ailments, so spiritual exercise protects us from the false teachings which sometimes threaten believers. Paul is not saying in verse 8 that bodily exercise is of no value. We need to exercise our physical bodies so that they will furnish us with strength to serve the Lord well—but the point of this passage is that we are to focus especially on keeping ourselves spiritually fit. Spiritual exercise includes prayer, meditation, self-examination, fellowship, service, sacrifice, submission, Bible study, witnessing to others, and determination to persevere in the faith. The issue in this verse is not whether physical exercise is of value, but whether spiritual fitness is of supreme value. Our desire to serve Christ faithfully should be as strong as the athlete’s desire to perfect certain skills in the world of sports. We should approach the duties of the Christian life with the same vigorous determination that athletes demonstrate when they try to develop competence in football or soccer.

The importance of spiritual exercise is a true principle that should be accepted by all believers (4:9). We should not ignore **physical fitness**, but our **spiritual fitness** is of much greater importance. We must diligently seek to avoid becoming spiritually flabby.

The preacher’s labors for Jesus are often strenuous, and sometimes bring opposition. The Apostle Paul labored and suffered reproach because he trusted in the living God (4:10), but our confidence in the

living God is so strong that it gives us an incentive to push onward, telling the story of God's love to people everywhere.

God is "the Saviour of all men" (4:10) in the sense that He preserves all in the daily providences of life; God is the Savior of all in that He made provision for the salvation of all. All people receive God's **general mercy**—the sun and the rain fall on the good and bad alike. But the **saving mercy** of God is received only by those whose hearts are open to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul realized that Jesus is **potentially** the Savior of all men, but He is **actually** the Savior of those who believe in Him. Jesus stated clearly that in the end, not all would be saved. Some will go away into "everlasting punishment" while others will experience "life eternal" (Matthew 25:46).

3. Practice Rigid Self Discipline (4:11-16)

There are a number of positive commands in the last part of chapter 4 of 1 Timothy. Timothy is to teach sound doctrine (4:11); he is to be a model Christian (4:12); he is to attend to reading (4:13); he is not to neglect his spiritual gift (4:14); he is to be absorbed in spiritual disciplines (4:15); and he is to pay attention to his own life and teaching (4:16).

The preacher is to speak the truth with firmness and with authority (4:11). The words "command" and "teach" imply firmness in presenting the truth. There are some indications in Scripture that Timothy was a timid and shy person. Confronting the false teachers at Ephesus was not his favorite activity. This may be one of the reasons why the Apostle Paul continues to admonish him to be strong, to take charge, to lead.

One preacher, speaking to a noted secular actor, said, "Why do you actors get such large audiences, and we preachers seem so ineffective?" To which the actor replied: "We actors take fiction and present it as if it were true; many of you preachers take truth and present it as if it were fiction."

Some of the leaders at Ephesus were older than Timothy, and may have been inclined to look down upon his teaching. But the younger minister can gain the respect of those who are older by setting before them a good example. Timothy was to set an example in six areas (4:12):

- **"in word"** means that he was to be careful about his speech. Timothy was not to use bitter words; he was to "let his word be his bond" careful to keep a promise. (When you borrow a book, a hammer, or an umbrella—and promise to return it—be meticulous about doing so.)
- **"in conversation"** speaks of general conduct, the way we live from day to day. True greatness relates to one's character as life is lived out day in and day out.
- **"in love"** speaks of seeking the best for others, even for those who seek the worst for us. Love is magnanimity; it includes praying for, and working with, those who have gone astray and made shipwreck of life. Love includes going the second mile with those who persecute us.

- **“in spirit”** speaks of attitudes. It is possible for a Christian who doesn’t gamble or swear or get drunk—to be difficult to live with because of wrong attitudes. We must guard against being irritable, faultfinding, unforgiving, and childish.
- **“in faith”** speaks especially of faithfulness. For the Christian, faithfulness means loyalty to Christ regardless of the cost, loyalty to one’s married partner, and loyalty to the family of believers.
- **“in purity”** means to avoid sexual impurity. Purity speaks of chastity before marriage and loyalty after marriage. John Wesley’s advice to his workers was, “Always converse sparingly and appropriately with persons of the opposite sex.”

Timothy was to live an exemplary life. The plural “you” at the very end of 1 Timothy means that the instructions found here—are for all of us. There is simply no effective argument against a good Christian life. A follower of Christ will have standards of honor and purity far above the standards of the world.

Furthermore, Timothy was to “give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine” (4:13). Reading the right kinds of materials enriches the mind and strengthens the soul. Wise is the person who budgets his time to allow for this important exercise. The reference here is most likely to **the public reading of Scriptures**. Those who read the Scriptures publicly ought to prepare themselves privately, so that the Bible can be read in a moving way, and not with casualness and sloppiness.

The word “exhortation” means that the minister is to take the Word of God and make practical applications to daily conduct. We are to concentrate on communicating the Word of God and applying it to real life situations—in such a way that others will grasp it.

The term “doctrine” refers to beliefs (teachings). At the close of the Sermon on the Mount, the people “were astonished” at Jesus’ doctrine (Matthew 7:28). In the early church, the new converts “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42). The time will come “when they will not endure sound doctrine” (2 Timothy 4:3).

Timothy was not to neglect “the gift that . . . was given by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery” (4:14). Timothy had been given a gift from God—not the gift of gab or of being able to get along well with people—but the gift of communicating the Word of God. The gift is bestowed by the Holy Spirit, should be recognized by the church, and is consecrated to the Lord by the laying on of hands.

The gift for proclaiming truth needs to be nurtured and developed. The believer can become lazy. We must be careful not to neglect the gift that God has given. Weeds grow in a garden because of neglect. A good business goes to pieces because of neglect. A happy marriage hits the rocks because of neglect. And just so, workers for God must constantly guard against the subtle enemy of neglect. It can render our ministry ineffective.

Timothy was to “meditate on these things” (4:15), meaning “to attend to with carefulness.” He was to be so absorbed in the duties described in (4:11-16) that his “profiting” (progress) would be evident to all. A hard-working, enthusiastic, devoted church worker will bear spiritual fruit that will be noticed by others. People will notice that he works hard, studies much, and gives attention to reading.

The word “wholly” (4:15) does not necessarily mean that the minister must devote all his time to the ministry of the Word. Paul himself devoted some time to tentmaking. But the preacher should throw himself wholeheartedly into his task, so that everyone can see his growth and progress. We must not insult the Lord by offering Him the mere dregs of our energy; we should put body and soul into doing His work.

The chapter is concluded with an admonition to Timothy, reminding him to guard his life and his teachings (4:16). The church leader’s life and message are both supremely important. He should give attention to his life—taking inventory frequently to see that his life is what God expects. And he is also to make certain that his teachings are consistent with the Word of God.

The “salvation” mentioned in 1 Timothy 4:16 is not speaking of salvation in the eternal sense. The verse concludes with the words, “for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee.” The salvation named here has to do especially with salvation from the snares and pitfalls which Satan places before Christians—false teaching, erroneous thinking, and complacent living. The errors today include environmentalism, pantheism, New Age monism, and a host of other strange ideas.

Timothy had started well. Now he must be sure to continue on in this good path. The winner in the spiritual race must not only begin well, but must cross the finish line still running with enthusiasm. We can expect hardship, but God urges us to get into the gymnasium and exercise for all we are worth!

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