

Priorities for Priests

1 Timothy 4

1. Introduction

What people think constitutes a good minister varies enormously. I referred in the September Synod to the leaflet entitled Super Pastor which was a compilation of different expectations. A friend of mine once started in a new parish and was visiting a very important and wealthy 'gatekeeper' of the church for the first time. She said if he wanted to fill the church he should increase the number of communions and decrease the amount of preaching! He replied very politely that he was a minister of both word and sacraments. As I said a few years' ago to other ordinands once you are ordained you will receive all manner of gratuitous advice about how to grow or improve the church.

In 1 Timothy 4 Paul outlines to his young charge what constitutes being a *good servant* (or minister) of *Christ Jesus* (6). It seems to me that the twin priorities for good ministers are summed up in verse 16 –

Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.

2. Protect The Flock

As Jesus observed in John 10 a good shepherd will make sure the flock is fed, watered and protected. The minister feeds, waters and protects the sheep principally through a teaching ministry. We must persevere in teaching God's word so that the flock may attain the salvation God has promised in Christ. The congregation's ultimate destiny will depend on our priorities and this text suggests at least two –

(a) Warn about error (6)

This will be hard to do in a tolerant culture when truth is relative and we are all urged to work together. But what if the truth of the gospel is at stake? What will we do when the latest theological fad sweeps across the shores of the local church? Will we be prepared to be the odd person out? That is why Paul says Timothy will be a *good minister* if he puts *these instructions before the brothers and sisters* (6). He is referring back to verses 3-5 where he has made the point that exaggerated asceticism in that context is not God's general will. Holiness is not attained by abstaining from things God created as good. The false teachers troubling the church in Ephesus believed matter was evil and only the spirit was good so took a dim view of marriage and certain foods. Notice Paul counters this error very positively and we will do well to emulate his example. If the error is in the area of justification by works, we must preach grace positively. If the error is in the realm of the Spirit, we preach about His person and work more positively than those dividing the flock. Instead of just slamming error we need to give our people a reason to embrace the truth. While some respond to shock tactics, many more respond to gentle, loving truth (2 Timothy 2:25).

But in addition the good minister will point out the ultimate causes of error. The devil (1) is the great deceiver (according to Jesus *a liar and the father of lies*). One tactic used is to encourage people to deny their inner voice until they are so good at it that their conscience becomes cauterised or unfeeling. It is then but a short step to becoming a hypocritical liar, teaching falsehood in the guise of truth. How essential it is for Christian leaders to be people of prayer in the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged! How essential is to warn our people never to tamper with conscience but keep educating it by the word of God.

(b) Fulfil Your Teaching Ministry (13-14)

Timothy is to *give attention to* or rather devote himself to the ministry of God's word. The public reading of Scripture is mentioned, as is expounding and applying the public reading

(παρακλησει). *Teaching* means instruction in the great truths of the Christian faith. In public in the pulpit and in private in the home visit, the good minister reads, applies and teaches God's word. This is a particular challenge for us because according to the NCLS figures we now encounter church people who hardly ever read the Bible during the week and only in church every second or third Sunday! We also need the encouragement from verse 14 to not neglect our calling as preachers or teachers of God's word. Gifts need to be used or they wither & die (e.g. tennis or golfing skills). Preaching/teaching is no different. Be disciplined. We need to fight to prepare properly. One black preacher described his method in the following way – '*Read myself full, Think myself clear. Pray myself hot. Let myself go!*'

Of course *good servants of Christ Jesus* take care to nurture their own faith (6b). This picture is from child rearing. Our English translations give the wrong impression with their past tenses. *ἐντρέφόμενος* is a present meaning *keep on feeding yourselves* spiritually. Like teenage boys who constantly graze because they are unfillable, good clergy daily nourish their faith by reading and meditating on *the words of the faith and of the sound teaching*. In short, their focus remains on Jesus. If we have a vibrant personal relationship with Christ we will be better equipped to protect the flock with his word. We will warn about error gently and teach the truth energetically.

3. Watch Your Life

Example is very important in the learning process. Raising children is a very salutary experience, because they quickly point out the inconsistencies between what we say and what we do. Moreover they sometimes embarrass us by doing what we do rather than what we say! In the context of this charge I remind you that congregations often grow to be like their leaders. Paul therefore says two things to Timothy –

a) Train yourself in godliness (7-8)

The picture is from athletics and physical training. I can now only vaguely remember my regular training for Sydney grade hockey when I was at university, but I do remember the benefits were limited to the season and I certainly know they did not last until I turned 68! On the other hand spiritual training has eternal consequences (8b), so we need to keep on practising *godliness* or God-centredness. We need to get rid of the junk food (7a), focus on what is valuable (6) and then exercise ourselves into a life which revolves around God. This means anticipating the life of heaven on earth; cultivating Christ-like qualities with the help of God's Spirit; submitting to God's rule and practising kindness, gentleness and self control. It means playing to the gallery of One and always seeking to please God.

b) Set an example (11-12)

A number of areas are mentioned in the text, which presumably were areas where the straying elders in Ephesus were weak. Timothy is to set an example in *speech* because while the others were an argumentative lot, he is to be marked by integrity and truth. He is to use his tongue to encourage and build up not to belittle and destroy. So we will shun the lie in all its forms – the tendency to exaggerate, to tell only that part of the story which is favourable to us, to make promises we do not keep. He is to set an example in *conduct* (his public life is to be exemplary) and *love* (he is to genuinely care for his people, and no matter what they do to him or say of him he will seek nothing but their good). It was said of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer that if you gave him dirt you would gain him as a friend! Whereas some elders in Ephesus had shipwrecked their faith, the good minister sets an example in *faith* (faithful to God's self revelation, loyalty to Christ and his word, depending on God at all times). Finally he is to set an example in *purity*. When the Roman writer Pliny reported back to the Emperor Trajan about the Christians he wrote:

They are accustomed to bind themselves by oath to commit neither theft, robbery nor adultery; never to break their word and never to deny a pledge.

In short, we need to cultivate a life of purity deriving from single minded allegiance to Christ.

4. Conclusion

Good servants of Christ Jesus protect the flock by warning about error and teaching the truth. Good servants of Christ Jesus set an example of godliness by watching their own lives carefully. We must give ourselves to these things (15). Paul says –

Devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress.

We need to grow in the faith and in godliness. Our people need to see a human being who admits mistakes and appropriately shares struggles. Besides even if it was possible it is dangerous to think you have already arrived. Moreover if we are pleading with our people to become more like Christ, then it is incumbent on us to daily seek to become more like the one whose *servant* we are. Ultimately the salvation of others depends on us (16), so watch your life and doctrine closely. The danger of professional ministry is that we get out of balance. We get so focused on the teaching that we can neglect the visual part of the sermon. It is also fatally easy to become so busy in the Lord's work that we leave no time for the Lord himself or to be so concerned for the welfare of others that we fail to keep a watchful eye on ourselves. So my friends, teach and model the gospel in such a fashion that God's people will be encouraged to persevere in Christ in love and faith. Protect the flock and watch your life.

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