

Littlebourne 23rd March 2025 – 1 Timothy 4:6-16 – PH

⁶ If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. ⁷ Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. ⁸ 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. ⁹ This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. ¹⁰ That is why we labour and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, and especially of those who believe. ¹¹ Command and teach these things. ¹² 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. ¹³ Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. ¹⁴ Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you. ¹⁵ Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. ¹⁶ Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

The first verse we read this afternoon refers back to the beginning of the chapter – that there will be those in the church who abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits because their consciences have been seared. They are those who forbid marriage and stick to certain foods. In other words, people who have become legalistic in following a false religion based on man-made rules of self-denial with the appearance of spiritual purity as if such behaviour will gain favour with God. There were in the early church many apostate teachers who claimed that to be closer to God they had to be piously ascetic in denying fleshly pleasures such as good food, having a family, and all sorts of other restrictions. Paul tells Timothy to instruct the church in the truths revealed by Jesus, the Word of God - which was the Old Testament – and what Paul revealed through the working of Holy Spirit. Paul tells Timothy to teach the brothers (and sisters) in the church. The job of a good church minister – the Greek word for minister is “diakonos” which means teacher - of Jesus Christ is to teach! In Paul's letter to Titus – chapter 2:1 – he says “*You, however, must teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine*”. All sorts of people can teach, but for the church, the teaching must be sound doctrine. To Timothy he says that he must be “*nourished on the truths of faith*”. It's not just the minister, but we too need to be “nourished on the truth” by reading our Bibles daily. Timothy didn't have a New Testament, but he will have taken notes of what Paul had said during the time he was with him, as well as access to some of the Old Testament. We know the Greek translation – the Septuagint – was widely available and was quoted by the apostles and Paul. In addition, Paul seems to be blowing his own trumpet and praising Timothy at the same time by saying that he provided the “good teaching you have followed”. There were some who had had good teaching but failed to follow it.

⁷ *Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.* In Ephesus the people in the congregation were culturally Greek or Jewish, and while they accepted Jesus as Messiah, many kept hold of, or wouldn't forget, their traditional views learnt as children and young adults. None of the converts in Ephesus were brought up culturally as Christians as it was only a few years ago that Paul came to Ephesus with the Gospel. There would have been Greeks familiar with Stoicism, Epicureanism, Scepticism, Rationalism, Empiricism, Platonism, etc etc. Among the Jews, there would have been Pharisees and Sadducees who believed that Gentiles were created to stoke the fires of hell, and therefore they would avoid contact with them. Both Greek and Jew sought to be righteous, whatever cultural norm they followed. Christianity brought Greek and Jew together and required a change of heart. This involved the removal of the arrogant belief that culturally and politically their beliefs were superior to others. This clash of cultures needed to be replaced with love for God, love for neighbours by preferring others above oneself. It involved training to be godly or as it says in the Greek, “exercise yourself to piety”. What being Godly doesn't mean is being ascetic in the negative way mentioned earlier. Rather it means being obedient to God's Word, faithful and loving. Consequently, we should all be seeking to follow God's ways rather than man's ways. Proverbs 21:2 *Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts.* There is so much temptation to follow what society is treating as its normal behaviour which is contrary to what God expects from us. When we accept “godless myths”, the things which are profane and patently untrue at the same time as accepting Biblical truths, we are effectively being double minded and apostate. We cannot claim to believe God's Word at the same time as not believing parts which we disagree with, and which society today disagrees with.

⁸ *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.* ⁹ *This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.*

Paul goes on to show how godliness is to be achieved by using the comparison with bodily training. Yes, we need to exercise our bodies – hence some value! But “physical training” to our minds means “physical exercise” but to the Greeks who took a more holistic approach to exercise, it would have included self-control over all aspects of life both physical and mental. We need to exercise our minds as well as our bodies by being devoted to the Word and guided by the Holy Spirit. Being a Christian is a way of life on earth with a promise of eternal life to come. It involves a change in attitudes and behaviour that requires training over time. Just as in chapter 1 verse 15 Paul writes ¹⁵ *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst – Paul writes that it is a trustworthy saying that “godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”* We know that the Christian life may not be the most comfortable, pleasurable, wealthy or easiest, but it offers instead contentment, peace, and fulfilment.

¹⁰ *That is why we labour and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, and especially of those who believe.* ¹¹ *Command and teach these things.*

We may well have to work hard and we may have to suffer, but we can put our trust in God who will never forsake us, nor leave us knowing we have been saved. Salvation is more valuable than all the riches the earth has to offer. Salvation is available to all mankind, but there is a distinction that salvation is granted freely to those who believe and is not given to those who have chosen to reject or ignore Jesus. For those who have never heard of Jesus, God will judge as He sees fit, but for those who have heard there is judgment. We so often have John 3:16 quoted but the following verses are left out because they reveal what people don’t want to hear. ¹⁶ *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* ¹⁷ *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.* ¹⁸ *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.* ¹⁹ *This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.* ²⁰ *Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.* ²¹ *But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.* This is what needs to be taught so that all Christians know the destiny of those who are lost, and who may perish without accepting Jesus as saviour.

¹² *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.* ¹³ *Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.* We are all to be examples, whether young or old. These instructions are perhaps more relevant to ministers as a basis for their conduct as well as their preaching and teaching. People make decisions about us based not on what we say, but on what we do. If the lifestyle of a Christian, whether leader or plain disciple, doesn’t match what is preached, who would believe that faith in Jesus makes a difference in behaviour? Paul expected to return to Ephesus at some time after he would be released from captivity in Rome, but it never happened. In the synagogues, reading the Word is part of the services. We have to presume that Scripture was the Old Testament, with some of Paul’s letters because neither the Gospels nor The Acts of the Apostles were likely to have been available, given that Acts goes up to Paul heading for Rome which would be just a few years before this letter to Timothy was written.

¹⁴ *Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.* ¹⁵ *Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.* We know that ordination involved the laying on of hands from the days of Joshua when Moses commissioned him to lead Israel (Deut 34:9 ⁹ *Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses.*). Timothy’s gift was to do what the Holy Spirit told him to say and do, and would be doing what Paul was doing, what the apostles were doing. Not just teaching, but healing, discerning spirits, governing the church, and whatever other gifts the Holy Spirit would graciously bestow on him. A church leader should be more than a passive Christian, content in being saved. Spiritual growth comes from working with Holy Spirit and all will see the results.

¹⁶ *Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.* John Calvin has this to say about pastors/ministers: *“And just as the unfaithfulness or negligence of a pastor is fatal to the Church, so it is right for its salvation to be ascribed to his faithfulness and diligence. It is indeed true that it is God alone who saves and not even the smallest part of His glory can rightly be transferred to men. But*

God's glory is in no way diminished by His using the labour of men in bestowing salvation." This quote sums up the importance of the work of a minister. Someone once said that the church often reflects its minister.

Our denomination's ministers rarely stay more than a decade before moving on, which is not how it would have been in the early church. The overseers or bishops in the early church usually persevered and stayed for life unless they were called to be evangelists or some other ministry which involved moving around all the churches in the Roman world. The warnings to the seven churches in Asia which had been established over the previous 20 to 30 years when John had his revelation show how quickly things can change from what they ought to be. Those weaknesses are found today and need to be addressed. Timothy was in Ephesus a long time and was her first bishop. He died in 97AD. John's Revelation was believed to have been written in 96AD. The warning from the angel of the church in Ephesus mentions the Nicolaitians, and they are mentioned again in the church in Pergamon. Not that much is known about these heretics, but Iraeneus (130-202AD) said they lived lives of unrestrained indulgence full of adultery and immorality. It was claimed by Clement of Alexandria (150-215AD) that Nicholas (assumed to be seventh deacon) was a jealous man, and on being rebuked by the apostles, he responded by being willing to offer his beautiful wife to others to demonstrate his selflessness, which resulted in others imitating him by doing likewise. This share and share alike attitude to wives resulted in debauchery, while in other areas this sharing attitude might be considered quite selfless to have things held in common. Yes the angel to the church in Ephesus says they hate the Nicolaitians, but that is mentioned because they had been around in Ephesus. We can see that Paul was already addressing problems in the church of Ephesus 20 years earlier, and Timothy will have tried to keep the church on the right track. But the Ephesian church had lost her first love.

To sum up: we all need to be unwilling to be swayed by the western world's move away from Christianity as the foundation of the laws and behaviours expected from everyone in the land. We need to be bold, strong and courageous, for the Lord our God is with us. The changes in the last few decades in what Parliament has made lawful in society but which is contrary to the Word of God is not acceptable for us to affirm. There are of course many in the wider church who do affirm what is condemned in the Bible as they claim love overrides everything else. While these unbiblical views are not myths, superstitions and old wives tales, they are outside the doctrine that Paul shared with the church in Ephesus in his letter to Timothy, and which Paul, the apostles and Jesus share with us in the New Testament. The New Testament is full of instructions and leading godly lives involves obeying what God has revealed we should do, and not doing what God has revealed as evil and sinful. Many in the early church fell for the attraction of being saved without altering their lifestyles, and this is what Paul is telling Timothy to look out for and correct. Today we too have many who cheapen the grace of God by saying "thank you very much for saving me" and carrying on as usual in the expectation that all will be forgiven without repentance. Repentance means making a conscience effort to change from wrong doing to right doing. We are all weak and will stumble and repeat the same mistakes made in the past, but *"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."*

The way to stay focused on Jesus is to put on the full armour of God and to repent daily. (Ephesians 6:10-18)