

Training for Service

1 Timothy 4:6-12

Also Psalm 1:1-6

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the riches of your word. Be with us in this hour, that we may profit from this scripture. Enlighten our minds that we may understand, soften our hearts that we may respond, and direct our wills that we may obey Your word. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Advice to a Young Pastor

Paul cared deeply about the churches he planted and the people in them. Paul had planted churches in the major cities of present-day Turkey and moved on to plant churches in Greece. In each church he had ordained elders, and in the most important city of Asia Minor he had installed his protégée, Timothy, as pastor. Ephesus was the most important city in the Roman province of Asia Minor, and even though Timothy was young, he was the best man to pastor this church. So you can see why Paul wrote two letters to Timothy. He wanted his son in the faith to prosper as a pastor, and he wanted the church he planted in Ephesus to flourish. Our passage this morning is an excerpt of Paul's letter, and even though we are not pastors, we are young – so we can expect this text to apply to us.

Called to Serve

The fundamental position of everyone in the Kingdom of God is servant, and that is how Paul addresses Timothy here. This is how Paul thought of himself. Paul did not hesitate to claim the authority of an apostle, but as an apostle Paul was merely a servant of Christ. When the church he planted in Corinth had begun to turn away from Paul to other teachers, Paul wrote a letter to them and said, "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." (1 Corinthians 4:1) He was just following the example of Jesus. When His disciples were arguing about which of them was the greatest, Jesus said,

"You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45)

Do you want to be great? Do you want to be admired at school, to be promoted at work, to become a leader in church? Did you come to this conference to learn how to break out of your mediocre existence and become a leader? These are not bad goals. In fact they are good desires in the right context. If you wish to excel, then Jesus tells you the secret: become a servant. That is how Jesus did it, and it worked for Him. Jesus left the glory of heaven and took the shabby role of a poor carpenter and teacher. Then Jesus died in the manner reserved for the worst people on earth. Then Jesus was resurrected as the greatest man in heaven and earth! The path to greatness is in humbling oneself, taking the low place, and serving others.

Or is greatness unappealing to you? Would you rather be normal, a companion to your friends and a friend to all? If this is your goal in life, you also are expected to be a servant. Servanthood is the normal condition of Christians. Addressing *all* people, Peter wrote, "Clothe yourselves, *all of you*, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God..." (1 Peter 5:5-6)

Jesus was a servant, the apostles were servants, and all Christians are servants. This is the fundamental reality of our lives. Is this how you think of yourself? Do you approach other people as their servant? Do you join activities as a servant, or as a consumer? Did you come here this morning to serve? Are you looking for ways to help, or are you thinking Nic is handling everything? Are on the lookout for someone here who might need a friend? Is servanthood your default attitude? We are all servants. We are either good

servants, or bad servants. Paul wrote this letter to Timothy to help him be a good servant, and we will be good servants if we accept and apply what God has to say to us through Paul.

Need for Training

We are all born helpless babies. You have probably seen little babies. They cannot do much. They cannot even walk and talk. The most impressive thing they do is poop. If we are able to walk and eat and talk, it is because we have been trained to do so, and have practiced it a lot. I am fairly good at speaking English, but not so good at French. I studied French for three semesters and used it a bit one summer, but not enough to learn the language. Our son Christopher is fluent in Mandarin. He did not take three semesters and practice casually one summer. Christopher studied Mandarin for eight semesters, spent four summers in China, and took a grueling immersion course. That is the difference between training and dabbling. Christopher was training and I was dabbling. Christopher trained himself in Mandarin, and now he speaks fluently. The godliness of some people is as poor as my French. Like my French, they dabble in godliness. They go to worship more or less, read the Bible occasionally, pray when desperate, and cannot understand why God seems so distant.

You cannot learn a foreign language without extensive training. You cannot play badminton or football well without extensive training. Seven years ago I had a stroke and could not walk. Do you know why I can walk unassisted on my own legs now? I spent six months training myself to walk again. You cannot do anything well without serious training. Some things, like our native language, seem to come naturally, but that is only because the training is in a natural setting, like your family. You cannot become a strong Christian without serious training. Now hold on, I am not talking about quitting university and going to a Bible college or seminary. Training in godliness takes place within your normal situation. Growth in godliness is accomplished by on-the-job training. The issue is not where you are, but *what you are doing* where you are.

Paul highlights “the words of the faith and of the good doctrine” as the subjects of our training. Of course you can enroll in seminary classes to grow in your understanding of the faith, but let’s start at the beginning. The first step in training as a Christian is reading the Bible, and this is something that all ordinary people can do without changing much about their daily activities. A Christian should have read the whole Bible, don’t you think? If you read one chapter a day, that will take five or ten minutes, and in a couple of years you will have read the whole Bible. That is a start, but surely you want to be more familiar with some parts, like the gospels, don’t you? Would it disrupt your life too much to read the Bible for a half-hour each day? Maybe ten minutes when you wake up, ten minutes at lunch, and ten minutes before sleeping. Some of you may be like me. I absorb things better in large portions. Rather than a half-hour each day, I learn better by reading for several hours once a week. However you do it, a growing knowledge of the Bible is the start of training in godliness.

We are surrounded by ways to grow in our faith. Some of you may listen to podcasts while you are driving to school or work. There are books which help us understand our faith, and there are conferences like this one. Regular in-person teaching is essential, so you all should be sure to go to Anchor or another campus fellowship or young adults group or a Bible study every week. Consistency is essential. Training does not occur when you do something once in a while. The key is to start small with something you can do every day until it becomes a habit, and then add to it. A good servant shows up to help, but he is not much help if he is untrained. Gen-Z is no different from every generation since Adam. We are helpless babies without training. Cute, but rather useless. Do not be useless. Train yourself in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine.

Distracting Myths

When I sit down to write a sermon, it suddenly becomes necessary to reply to email, and open the windows, and record expenses, and water the flowers, etc. Writing is not easy for me, and I am easily

distracted. Are you like that? What can distract you from training in godliness? Many things, but Paul focuses on one deadly maturity-killer: “irreverent and silly myths.” Even when you have watered the flowers and closed the email client, you may be led astray by plausible sounding false teaching. This was a huge problem for Paul in the first century, and it is a problem in every generation. The apostle John wrote against teaching which in the second century would grow into the Christian heresy of Gnosticism. These people claimed to follow Christ, but it was a false, corrupted Christ. Paul’s biggest problem was Jewish people who claimed that faith in Jesus was good, but insufficient. You needed to be circumcised and keep the Jewish law also. These are two prominent examples of silly myths. Paul is not primarily talking about the stories of Zeus and Apollo. By “irreverent and silly myths” Paul means false stories of salvation. Some salvation myths can be very alluring and confusing. That is why Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians and John wrote his letters – to warn Christians about the insidious dangers of these false salvation stories.

Circumcision was a terrible threat until God destroyed Jewish power in A.D. 70. God gave His people circumcision as a sacrament to bind them into His covenant, and any man who would not cut off his foreskin was cut off from God. Sacraments are serious business. Circumcision, and now baptism, is how God marks, identifies, and protects His people. When Jesus was cut off for our sins, that was the last cut-off, and circumcision ceased to be a sacrament. Jesus gave us baptism as the new sacrament by which God marks, identifies, and protects His people in the New Covenant. There is no harm in undergoing circumcision as a medical practice, but Paul said that whoever seeks circumcision for salvation is cursed. Does this sound severe? It might sound severe, but that is because it is a life-or-death issue. False gospels will kill you! Paul was rescuing his people from death, the way a father would grab his baby who had wandered out into a busy street. The issue was not the mechanics of circumcision, but implying that God had lied to us and trusting something other than Christ to save us.

What are the “irreverent and silly myths” of our culture and era? What do we tell ourselves will save us? For many modern people education is a false savior, and the myth is that a university degree and a good professional job will secure a happy life. Like circumcision, education by itself is neither good nor bad, and it can be very helpful in some circumstances. But there is a deadly difference between education as a means to serving God, and education as god. Not all people are serious students, but most of my classmates were. Students in the chemistry labs had to take their partial products home with them, because if they left them in the lab overnight, other students would destroy their work to make themselves look better. Twice I entered an exam to hear the professor apologize that someone had broken into the office the previous night and stolen the exam. These people were not pursuing an education to serve God. Education *was* their god. Parents can be even worse. A girl a year ahead of me got into dental school, but was not able to get into medical school. So her parents disowned her. These are spectacular cases, but what about you? Are you trusting God to use your education for some good purpose, or are you trusting your education to make you rich and happy? Here is a way to test your heart. What do you do if you get a low grade? Do you ask God to help you do better in the future? Or do you have an emotional collapse? Be honest with yourself. Are you *really* trusting God? Or have you fallen for a silly myth?

You should be aware of the cultural myths which can shove God out of your life – things which seem indispensable – stories we tell each other about what is essential to a prosperous and happy life. Is it a hot wife or rich husband? Is it a lucrative professional job? Is it living in a nice neighborhood? Driving a new car? No? How about a new iPhone? Good health? What are the things you cannot live without? What are your obsessive dreams? All these things may be good in themselves, but they cannot not save you; you can, in fact, live without them; and God may have other plans for you.

Focus on Training

What shall we do about false teaching? Shall we write books and hold classes to refute them? Do we need to develop apologetic materials to argue against heresies and cultural idols? Or is the most important thing never to encounter such things. I used to know some people who were opposed to university

education because they were convinced the university erodes your faith. Ruth encountered a father who would not allow his children to read books by Jewish authors because they were not Christian. Is this how we should treat false salvation stories?

No. Paul is saying neither attack these false salvation stories, nor ignore them. Paul's instruction is to "have nothing to do with [them]." You can read the literature of ancient Greece. Some of the myths are wonderful stories! Just do not rely on Zeus to save you, and do not waste your time arguing about those stories. You may be interested in modern Jewish traditions. That is harmless as long as you do not get sucked into endless arguments about religion with people who are closed to the gospel. In the university macro evolution is a virtual religion. It is good to be aware of what they teach, and know its foolishness, but it is pointless to engage in fruitless arguments with people whose ears are closed to the truth. Let them alone. Share Jesus if you get a chance, but otherwise "have nothing to do" with such people and their silly myths.

The key principle here is focus. We aspire to be good servants of God. We are engaged in training to be good servants. We focus on the things which accomplish our goal, and avoid things which distract us from the goal. In his next letter to Timothy Paul will compare the Christian life to a soldier, athlete, and farmer. All three of these men are sharply focused on their calling so that they succeed. Our focus is "the words of the faith and of the good doctrine," and we avoid getting entangled in "irreverent, silly myths." We are relentlessly focused on godliness, and we let false salvation stories blow past us. We do not follow cultural myths, not do we waste our time in endless arguments. We follow Jesus, we are constantly absorbing "the words of the faith and of the good doctrine," we are in training, and we do not let anything entangle us.

Our Hope in God

Do you like to train? Are you one of those people who love to go to the gym and pump iron until you are soaked with sweat and collapse in exhaustion? There are people like this. I am not one of them. So why should we get training? It sounds like work. Why not just coast through life as a normal Christian? The implication of Paul's letter is that coasting through life will leave you as a baby Christian. Babies are cute and charming, even if their only accomplishment is pooping. But if the best that you can do as a Christian is to poop, that is not cute and it is not charming. That not only makes you a baby Christian. It makes you a bad servant. So must we just man-up and sweat out this miserable training?

Paul reminds Timothy that we are doing this hard work because we have an amazing goal. Some of us might enjoy training just because we are not normal, and some of us may be unnaturally disciplined and just keep at it regardless of the pain. But for everyone, there is a glorious hope before us. Is it the hope of becoming a good servant? Is it the hope of avoiding humiliation on earth? Is it the hope of successfully getting to heaven? No. We do hope for all of those things, but they are not our hope. Not even being a good servant. Our hope is far, far, infinitely better. Our hope is God.

We, all of us, are constantly wondering what to do next: what classes to take, which girl to date, which movie to watch. *Good* Christians are thinking about which book of the Bible to read next, who to pray for, how to serve in the church. All of these are good things! Even the ones which sound a little carnal are good things. These are activities which we can honorably do, and some of them are things we *should* do. The problem is when we put our hope in them. But first let us clarify what is meant by hope.

We use the word "hope" interchangeably with wish. We say, "I hope we have good weather for our picnic," and we mean that we are wishing it does not rain. We use the word "hope" for something we want, but cannot be sure we will get. This is not what "hope" means in the New Testament. The Greek word we translate as "hope" (ἐλπίς) refers to something which is definite and certain, but in the future. It is not a wish. It is a *future fact*. It is a reality which we build our lives around. Ordinarily we build our lives around things which are present realities, and we consider it foolishly optimistic, maybe even dangerously reckless,

to build our lives around something which has not happened yet. But when God is in the picture, we are confident of the future because God guarantees it.

So now you see why it is a problem to place our hope in things we expect to do. You may wish for good grades, a good job, a fun weekend; you may wish for answers to your prayers, for insight into the scripture you read this morning, a successful Gen-Z conference. It is normal to wish for such things. It would be unhuman not to! But what happens when the Gen-Z conference is a flop? What are you supposed to do if you cannot get a job? What do you do when God does not answer your prayers? If these things are your hope, if you have built your life around them, your life crumbles around you when they do not happen. It is dangerous and foolish to place your hope even in “Christian” things. Scripture is abundantly clear that the church is to proclaim the gospel and the Holy Spirit will save people, so you may produce an evangelistic program and hope for conversions. But when it does not happen, then what? The point here is that there are many things we may do, and some things which we must do, but we must never place our hope in them. In other words, we must never act as though our activities will produce a certain result. This is a misplaced hope.

Our hope is not in activity, not even Christian activity, not even things we are commanded to do. We ought to obey the commands of scripture, but our hope is not in these. Our hope is in God. Not that God will do what we ask. Our hope is in a person, not an activity or result. We said that hope is a reality which we build our lives around. God is the only reality which we can build our lives around. God is our hope in that we are certain that He loves us, He protects us, He even likes us. What we do in a day, and what we plan for the weekend is pale compared to the reality that God is our companion. We may succeed in some activities, and we may fail in some, even Christian activities, but God never fails us. God always loves us, protects us, delights in us, in all of life’s ups and downs. All people hope *for* things, even Christians. Some of the things we hope for come to pass, and we rejoice. Some of the things we hope for do not happen, and we despair. Instead we are called to hope *in* God. All that we do is done in God, and whether a success or failure, we are still in God, the God who loves us, protects us, delights in us. When our hope is *in God*, not *for results*, we live joyfully.

Training can be hard, but we are doing it with God as our hope. God is our companion. He makes the hard things doable, He laughs with us in our joy, and He cries with us in our sorrow. Each day we have to decide what to do next, and some decisions are important. But with God as our hope, we sail through life easily, not that life is easy, but our passage is easy when God is our hope.

Be An Example

Paul concludes this passage by saying, “Let no one despise your youth.” Do you sometimes feel invisible at church? Does it seem that no one values your opinion? Are young people rather devalued in your community? Paul says, do not let anyone devalue you just because you are young. Now that is a bold command. Count on Paul to command Timothy to change the behavior and attitudes of other people!

If the adults in the church ignore or are dismissive of you, should you be more assertive? If the pastor is too busy to meet with you, should you refuse to accept his excuses and demand that he meet you anyway? If the elders shoot down your outreach idea, should you do it in spite of their obstinance? Is this what Paul means by letting no one despise your youth? By no means! If you think about it, you can see that such behavior will make you *more* despised, not less. Paul provides the solution in the next clause: “Set the believers an example...” and so he concludes this passage the way he began. The way for young people (and all people) to gain respect is to be a good servant of Christ Jesus.

If you will be an effective leader, or have some influence with other people, stop wasting your time on foolish activities, train yourself in the faith, hope in God, and serve those around you. Start at home. If you wish to become a good Christian and an effective leader, help your mother with the laundry, help your

father mow the lawn, help your brothers and sisters with their schoolwork. Do not go home and loaf. Go home and serve. On campus look for other students who are struggling or distressed. Comfort the broken-hearted, encourage the weak, help those who are struggling. Do not go to school to have a good time or to get the best grades. Go to school to help your classmates. At church ask your pastor how you can serve the church. Perhaps help with small children, set up for lunch and clean up afterward, whatever your church needs. Do not go to church to be served. Go to church to serve others. As you set an example of serving others, you will gain respect and discover opportunities for leadership.

Does this sound overwhelming? I have a strong suspicion that Timothy was overwhelmed. I am sure that Paul meant to help and encourage Timothy, and this letter is very helpful – but who is not overwhelmed by this expectation of servanthood? Does this sound impossible to you? I hope so, because all of God’s commands are impossible for sinful people. That is why Jesus came and died for our sins, and that is why Jesus sent the Holy Spirit. Paul tells Timothy in his second letter that the Spirit Jesus gave us is a Spirit of “power and love and self-control.” A life of service is miserable toil for sinful people, but it is a life of joy for those being made into the image of Christ by the Holy Spirit. Day by day Jesus is making us more like Himself as the Holy Spirit works in our lives, and every day the powerful Spirit enables weak, sinful us to do impossible acts of service. You will not succeed in every case. Sometimes you may find yourself in over your head and make mistakes. Sometimes you may give in to selfishness. But when your hope is in God and you are depending on the powerful, loving Holy Spirit to work in you, you will find yourself capable of astonishing acts of service – and loving it!

Prayer

Father God, we are easily overwhelmed when we see clearly the life of Christ expected in us. Most of the time we are drifting along doing our best in this life, but the gospel shows us how far short we come. That same gospel shows us how great is our salvation, but we are so unfocused, we lose sight of the gospel and we place our hope in many things besides You. So we come to You now with our familiar request, that You work in us that which we cannot do for ourselves. Fulfill in us the promise of the Spirit to make us like Christ. Drain out of us our selfishness. Take our eyes off of the sully myths of our culture. Cause us, day by day, more and more, to place our hope in You. Give us zeal for hard training, and make us examples of Your love and power at work in sinful men and women. This we ask in the name of Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

C. David Green
Anchor Gen-Z Leadership Conference
November 15, 2025