

A GOOD MINISTER

by Ray C. Stedman

Last week Ron Ritchie and I were at Indiana University. We had a great time of Christian fellowship on a beautiful campus in the midst of all the fall colors. Besides the students, some of the townspeople had come up to our meetings, and among them was a young pastor by the name of Lou who showed up for every meeting. He was very spiritually hungry. He sat down and talked with me at great length, telling me some of the problems he was facing. He seemed to welcome the opportunity to share with an older, more experienced Christian. (Obviously, I am too young-looking to inspire that kind of confidence, but Ron Ritchie, with his grey hair and beard, awakened that sense of desire in this young man!)

As I watched that young pastor I was reminded of Timothy, left alone in Ephesus, having to face the problems of a growing church in a pagan city, longing many times, I am sure, to have Paul there to ask him a question or to go over a situation with him. How Timothy must have welcomed this letter from the apostle to encourage him in the midst of his dangerous and demanding life! How many times he must have said, "Where is Paul right when I need him?" Yet I am glad that Paul was not there, because if he had been we never would have received this great letter to Timothy, and the church through twenty centuries would not have been the beneficiary of the counsel of the apostle.

Paul never minced any words when he wrote to Timothy; he faced with realism the situation that confronted Timothy, without turning from it in any degree. Paul knew this young man was up against a tough, hard, dangerous situation that called for a cool head, a loving heart, a careful behavior, and a strong, sturdy, unwavering faith. The apostle reminds Timothy of this several times in this letter.

The passage we are looking at this morning is one of those warnings, one of those reminders of the need for a personal walk before God. First Timothy 4:6-10:

**If you put these instructions before the brethren, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished on the words of the faith and of the good doctrine which you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless and silly myths. Train yourself in godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.
{1 Tim 4:6-10}**

With these words Paul seeks to encourage Timothy to stand fast in the midst of the pressures facing him.

It is necessary that we clearly understand the phrase Paul uses about Timothy. When he calls him, "a good minister of Christ Jesus," he is not thinking of him as a member of the clergy, like we would think of the pastor of a church, standing up in front of a congregation. The word that is used here is actually the word, "deacon," rather than minister -- "a good deacon of Jesus Christ." Even then the word is not referring to Timothy as an officer of the church; rather it is the word that is commonly translated many places in Scripture, "a servant." That is what a deacon is -- one who serves. Here Paul is using the word in the widest sense possible -- "a good servant of Jesus Christ." Of course, in that sense that word includes everyone. All of us are called to be servants of the Lord Jesus, especially if we are in any ministry of teaching, or leading, or discipling someone.

In order to be a good servant of Jesus Christ the apostle says you need certain things; and the first admonition Paul gives Timothy is: Watch what you are feeding on! Be nourished on the words of the faith and the good doctrine which you have followed. Nourishment is what he is talking about.

What are you nourished by? That is the question this passage raises before us. What do you feed on daily? What do you put in your mind? What is your habitual input in your life? The sports pages, perhaps? Soap operas? The Dow Jones averages? TV movies? Best-seller novels? If any of those things are your daily diet, then I can guarantee you will be a spiritually undernourished servant of Jesus Christ, because the apostle makes clear that what you feed on is what is going to determine how effective you become.

I do not want anyone to eliminate any of those things as though they are wrong. Not one of them is wrong in itself. We are not to eliminate them, but we are to regulate them. That is the point Paul makes. Regulate them as things that can be very dangerously distracting to us and often too easily controlling of our thoughts.

The apostle urges Timothy to give himself instead to that which really feeds his spiritual life. What do you essentially need? Paul tells us: "the words of the faith, and good, sound doctrine." Do not be afraid of that word, *doctrine*; it means teaching -- the teaching of the truth, the reality of life. That is what Christians need.

Notice how Paul combines two important elements: knowledge, and decision. He says you need the good, sound words of the faith and good, sound teaching, and you are to follow them.

First you learn, and then you do what it says.

That is the formula for a good servant of Jesus Christ -- giving yourself to nourishing yourself, feeding upon these things and then following them.

You hold in your hands the greatest book ever written, the most amazing book in all the world, the only place in all humanity, in all human history, where you are given the bedrock, undiluted truth about life. The Word of God gives you the insights of God into life, the explanation of who you are, what God intended you to be and what will fulfill you. No book is more important to learn, to feed upon, than the Word of God. It is a big book; it takes a lot of reading, a lot of studying, a lot of thinking and meditating to grasp what it says, but when you do, it will change your life; it will lead you into fullness, freedom, liberty and beauty. That is what the Bible is for. So to feed upon this word is tremendously significant and important. That is why Paul stresses this with Timothy, reminding him of it.

In many ways this congregation is a biblically-taught congregation. The strongest point of this church may be that we teach the Word; we teach it widely and thoroughly. Yet I am continually amazed how many people, even here, really do not know the Bible. They do not know what it says and what it means; they cannot explain it. I know you are not going to make foolish, silly and shallow answers to Bible questions. You are never going to answer the question, "What are the four gospels?" as someone did, by saying, "Matthew, Mark, Luther and John." You know better than that. You are not going to say that you thought Dan and Beersheba were husband and wife like Sodom and Gomorrah, as someone said in answer to a Bible question. None of you, I am sure, are ever going to say that an epistle is the wife of an apostle. You know better than that.

But what if somebody asked you, "What does the new covenant mean?" Could you explain that? Could you tell them what it meant when Paul said he is "qualified to be a minister of the new covenant which gives life and not of the old written code which kills?" That is obviously something very important. Do you know what that means? The new covenant made in the blood of Jesus, and what it offers to us in terms of a foundation for living on a daily basis -- do you understand that? If you do not, you need to be nourished on the good words of the faith, and to follow the sound doctrine, the teaching of the Scriptures.

How many of you can explain the place of the Ten Commandments in the Christian's life after he becomes a Christian? There is very definitely a place for the Ten Commandments. The Law, as Jesus points out, is not done away with. Jesus came not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it, yet we do not live by the Law. Do you understand that? Can you explain that to someone?

Are you able to glory in the cross, as Paul did? Do you understand what the cross does to you as a person? Can you point out why the Apostle Paul's heart swelled with pride and thanksgiving when he thought of the cross of Jesus Christ, why he said, "In the cross of Christ I glory"? That is what we are talking about: knowing the Bible in such a way that its meaning has come home with tremendous significance to you

personally, and you are nourished on this; every day you feed yourself upon this amazing revelation; you are learning more and more about yourself and about the world and society and why it functions and operates the way it does.

Then there is the matter of following truth. How many of you are learning to bless those who persecute you? I am tempted to ask for a show of hands, but I will not. Tomorrow morning the boss may eat you out for something you never did. How are you going to respond? Do you know already, in advance, what you should do and want to do and determine to do it?

What about your home? Is it open to strangers? Scripture tells us to practice the love of strangers. Are you planning this week to take in somebody you do not know, to get acquainted with him and make your home available to him? What about being tenderhearted, forgiving others, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you? Is that happening? What about laboring with your hands in order that you might give to those who are in need? Is that happening? Do you see how practical these things are?

Yet everywhere in the world, it seems, Christians take these things lightly; they pay lip service to them, but do not do them. It is doing them that makes the difference, however, not believing them. Truth known does not help anybody; it is truth done that changes the world, delivers the weak and comforts the brokenhearted. This is Paul's positive exhortation to young Timothy: Nourish yourself on the good words of the faith; understand the sound teaching and follow it, do it. Set yourself to this task; obey the truth that you have learned. That is positive.

But there is a negative side. Look at Verse 7:

Have nothing to do with godless and silly myths. {1 Tim 4:7a RSV}

There are a lot of distracting things you could give your attention and your mind to. Evidently this was true in the 1st century as well as ours. I do not know what it was that was particularly in Paul's mind when he wrote to Timothy. Paul mentions earlier in the letter something about foolish myths, etc. These myths were godless only in the sense that they were common. (It is actually the word for common; it was widespread; everybody around believed this superstitious nonsense.) And these myths were silly, because the word really means, "foolish old wives' tales" -- stories that foolish women, riddled with superstition, spread around and everybody believed them. Paul tells Timothy not to give himself to these kinds of things.

Yet these myths are the scourge of every generation.

- Last week the Peninsula Times-Tribune had an article right on the front page about a man at Stanford who confessed that all his life he was afraid of women and never knew why. (If he had four daughters, a wife and a mother-in-law in his home, like I had, I could perhaps understand that!) The article said that this man went to a woman who called herself "a researcher into past lives." She told him she had the ability to go back into the lives he had lived earlier and there she discovered (according to her) that he had been attacked by a woman once. This was what was now producing this strange fear of women. What a bunch of hogwash! It is pure rubbish, an old wives' tale. There is absolutely no semblance of reality to that kind of superstitious nonsense. Yet thousands of people, even Christians, are going in for that kind of thing, believing in reincarnation. The entire record of the Bible, from beginning to end, sets aside the teaching of reincarnation. Resurrection is the biblical truth. In the same body in which you now live this life you will live all eternity; you do not get another one. Anybody who believes the Bible about resurrection can never believe in reincarnation. That is nonsense; it is an old wives' tale. Do not give yourself to silly myths like that.
- Another widespread myth in our day, one that is winning increasing status on every side, is the doctrines of Mormonism. Mormonism is based upon foolish myths about early American history that do not have a semblance, a shred of evidence from archaeology, to support them. Archaeologists have tried to find any evidence whatsoever for the strange story the Book of Mormon tells, about an early American civilization that flourished here before Columbus came. They can find nothing that confirms it in any degree. Instead, everything they find is absolutely contrary to the picture drawn in the Book

of Mormon. But how many believe this nonsense, and how widely it is being accepted and even gaining a position of prominence among us! I am not talking about Mormons. Many of them are wonderful, dear people. Merely because people are lost is no sign they are worthless. Mormons are often marvelous people, but their teachings are in error. We ought to understand that and not give ourselves to godless and silly myths.

- I was with a group the other day and somebody was telling me, with shining eyes, how they had discovered a book that unfolded the secrets of the great pyramid of Egypt. I have been familiar with that kind of story for years; it has been exploded time and time again. There are no mysterious secret chambers of the great pyramid, and there is nothing that it teaches. It is a remarkable achievement; it has left unanswered a lot of riddles as to how it could have been built, but there are no secret and hidden mysterious revelations about it. You can get that kind of stuff in the Rosicrucian temple in San Jose if you want to read up on it. But heed the admonition of the apostle: do not give yourself to this claptrap. It is worthless; it wastes your time.

What are you going to do with your time? Nourish yourself on the sound words of the faith; build yourself up in the sound doctrine of the Scriptures; understand the truth as it is in Jesus. Give your daily attention to this, that you might be nourished, strong, well-fed, capable, efficient Christians.

The apostle now turns to the body. He says (Verse 7b):

Train yourself in godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.
{1 Tim 7b-8 RSV}

There is the great verse for all the physical exercise enthusiasts. It raises the question, "Was Paul a jogger?" Certainly he was knowledgeable about some of these things. He speaks many times about the races that were run in the Greek world; he uses illustrations drawn from the boxing matches and gladiator fights. Maybe he had attended these occasions; I am sure he had. But I doubt if he gave himself very extensively to physical exercise, because, though, as he admits, it has a certain value about it, it is not where the drive of your life ought to be put. It ought to be in learning how to be a godly man or woman; a man or woman who walks with God in the midst of this life. (The word for godliness is that familiar word we have been looking at all through this letter, *eusebeia*, which really means "wholeness," "balanced," with the spirit being nourished and fed, the soul in order, and the body kept healthy and strong. That is what Paul is talking about.)

I think Paul was a walker, though not a jogger. On one occasion, the book of Acts tells us, he left a ship with his companions aboard, and while it sailed around a peninsula he walked twenty miles all alone across the neck of the peninsula in order that he might have time to meditate and pray and thus combine physical exercise with godly advance. Certainly Paul was not an overweight, self-indulgent, weak-willed opportunist. He knew the value of body training, but it occupied only a small part of his life. He did not give himself to it and go around flexing his muscles, like Arnold Schwarzenegger, pointing out what a body beautiful he had. Paul was giving himself to the development of the spirit and of the soul. because that, he said, is all-important.

Paul did not wish he had time for reading, for prayer and for meditation; he took time, he made time for it. He underlines this for us in Verse 9:

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance. {1 Tim 4:9 RSV}

Five times in this little letter that formula is repeated. Each time it is Paul's way of taking his pencil and underscoring what he says: "Listen to this: this is very important." "Train yourself in godliness. Bodily exercise is fine, but godliness will profit both in this life and in the life to come."

That is, you will learn much for your present advantage; it will help you now to give you courage. That is what you get when you understand the new covenant:

- It makes you bold, courageous, confident that God is at work.

- It will give you direction: you will know which way to go, what to avoid, what to say no to and what to say yes to.
- It will give you comfort in hours of defeat, discouragement and failure: it will pick you up and revive your spirit.
- It will teach you to love when it is difficult to do so, and show you that by responding to the love of God the love of Christ can flow out from you to others.
- It will give you self-acceptance: you will have confidence without conceit.

The world does not know how to do that. It says the way to build confidence is to build up your conceit. But the Scriptures will teach you how to be confident without conceit. It is of help in this life, and in the life to come. All these things are needed beyond this world as well; so, as you build and learn how to live now, you will learn how to live then, and be able to function effectively as a believer in the new body and the new world to come. Therefore, combine the two.

I was in Milpitas yesterday meeting with a group of men, among whom was John Bristol, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Milpitas. John is a young man whom I have known for a number of years. He came to some of our early workshops and learned some things that he said changed his life. He told me one story yesterday that illustrated that. At that time he was on the staff of the Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church with Ron Ritchie and Jim Gordon. Jim used to be a boxer, and he kept his body in good shape. John said to him, "Jim, give me some tips on bodily training. My stomach muscles, especially, are always flabby and sagging; I need help in toughening them up. What can I do?" Jim said, "What I do is take a basketball and put it on the floor; then I lie on it, with the basketball right here on my stomach. I put my entire weight on that ball for as long as I can stand it and I roll around. That toughens my muscles." So John said he would try that. He did, but he did not want to build up his body only, so he said, "What I used to do was take one of Ray Stedman's messages and lay it on the floor, and as I was face down, rolling around on the ball, I was reading a message." That is what I call really being on the ball! He was building himself up both spiritually and physically.

The apostle closes this section with a very important word on motivation. What is going to motivate you to do this? Amid all the pressures and demands of this hour, all the hurry, hurry, hurry schedule of our days, what is going to make you take time to nourish yourself on the words of faith, feed on it daily, and decide to follow it, to do something? Here is the answer (Verse 10):

For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe. {1 Tim 4:10 RSV}

That is what motivated Paul. "We toil and strive," he says. Those words indicate energy, something that requires effort, decision, commitment, action.

You cannot drift into godliness. You cannot get up in the morning, do your thing all day long, and grow and nourish yourself on the sound words of the faith. You have to set yourself to this:

- Choose times,
- Make times,
- Commit yourself to times of
 - Study,
 - Reading,
 - Meditation, and
 - Prayer.

Then you will have time for the other things, the normal demands of life.

But you must do this by deliberate action of the will. Pursue holiness, the Scriptures say; pursue godliness.

Why? What motivates you? Paul puts it, "because our hope is set on an encounter with the living God."

Giving yourself to these things draws you near to God; and, the nearer you get to God, the more turned-on your life is going to be because he happens to be the most exciting Being in the universe.

You cannot get near the living Lord Jesus without sensing a rising excitement, a sense of adventure, of danger and of joy in your whole being. He is a living God, not like the dead idol that was being worshipped in the temple at Ephesus. There some distorted meteorite fragment was being bowed down to by these poor people, with the hope that it would give some sense of relief in their deadened lives. It is not that.

Or, as many feel today, it is not a reliance on human energy or wisdom that says it is up to you to make your way through life. That will let you down just when you need it most.

Rather, it is a daily encounter with the living God, the Lord Jesus Christ, Lord of heaven and earth, the One in charge of life who has a firm grip on everything that is happening to you. Your encounter with him becomes as electrifying and as full of promise and blessing as it was to the disciples in the days of his flesh -- and even more so, because he is nearer you than he was to them. We sing about this:

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.

Is that happening in your life?

Do you wholly lean on Jesus' name all day long?

That is what happens when you are nourished on the great words of the faith, and in the sound doctrine of the Word of God, and follow it: You wholly lean on Jesus' name.

The closing words of this verse are very instructive. Here it is very clearly declared that Jesus has made salvation available to all men: He is the Savior of all men. Potentially, everyone in the world could be saved, were they to come to Jesus. He and no one else has made it possible. There is no other Savior, "no other name under heaven given among men" {Acts 4:12} can deliver but the name of Jesus. He is the Savior of all men.

But it only becomes effective, according to this verse, to those who believe.

Do you believe in Jesus?

I do not mean have you become a Christian. I assume most of you have. But having become a Christian, do you believe Jesus is with you?

- Do you believe that you would have been hopelessly lost without him?
- Do you believe that you have been fully forgiven and made acceptable before God by him?
- Do you believe that you are indwelt and empowered by him?
- Do you believe that you are headed for an eternity of glory with him?

That is what makes the difference. To really follow these things, to act upon them, to do something, not merely believe in your head -- that never delivered anybody, or blessed anybody -- it is what you do, on the basis of what you know, that makes the difference.

I want to close with the very wise words of Dr. Alan Redpath. He says:

Are you battling with yourself, defeated in life, going down under the buffeting? You face so many battles. None of us stands above you in this, because we know it all in our own hearts. But we would gladly tell you the good news that you overcome not by battle, but by faith and obedience. Any battle -- for victory, power, or

deliverance from ourselves or from sin -- which is not based constantly upon the gazing and the beholding of the Lord Jesus, with the heart and the life lifted up to him, is doomed to failure.

You cannot make your way through life by yourself. The empty things of the world are not going to sustain you in the hour of anguish. These things you give your time to every day, wasting hours at what ought to require only minutes, will not make you strong. Your strength comes from being nourished on the good words of the faith and understanding the sound teaching of the Word of God and following it.

Prayer

Lord, teach us to be men and women of faith in this day; a faith that acts, a faith that rises up and obeys what you tell us to do. Teach us to walk that way, that we might demonstrate in this world that we are in touch with the living God; that the Lord Jesus himself walks with us through our daily life, and we are empowered and strengthened by his grace. We pray in his name, Amen.

Title: A Good Minister
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Studies in First Timothy
Scripture: 1 Tim 4:6-10
Message No: 12
Catalog No: 3775
Date: Unknown Date in 1981

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