

Gospel Shaped Ministry

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[0:00] So we've been going through the first chapters of Timothy, 1 Timothy, and we've seen the way that Paul is developing his plan for a gospel-shaped ministry.

! We've looked at how to live an authentic life, we've looked at what a gospel-shaped church should look like, and I'm not going to repeat all this, but we've looked in various ways, positively, as how Paul wants to develop the church. In this passage he turns to warning. If you like, he starts to explain how it might all go horribly wrong, and warns us against that.

You might think this is a bit strange, but I'd like to remind you of Murphy's Law. Murphy's Law states that anything that can go wrong, will go wrong.

Actually, the law seems to apply to itself, as there's some dispute as to exact provenance, but it seems to have originated with Edward Murphy, an American engineer working in the 1950s. He had trouble with the centrifuge, as I gather, and found that things kept going wrong with it. But it's often misunderstood, actually, Murphy's Law.

[1:26] Murphy's Law is not saying there's something perverse about machines or human nature. I mean, we all know that things do go wrong with machines. I had a computer problem this morning.

But it's not actually blaming the machine for going wrong. In fact, Murphy's Law is really something that's quite obvious.

It says that if there's a flaw in any process, then eventually the circumstances will arise when that flaw becomes critical. In other words, if it can go wrong, at some point it will go wrong.

Now, you may seem a bit puzzled by this, because it may seem a rather unspiritual observation. Shouldn't we be trusting God to look after us?

If that's the case, why does he give us these warnings? Yes, of course we trust God to look after us as a church. But how does he do that?

[2:28] He does that by pointing out the pitfalls. He does that by pointing out the way things should go wrong and what we need to do to avoid that.

People talk about blind faith. But what Paul is recommending here is not blind faith, but on the contrary, it's watchful faith. Faith that keeps its guard, that thinks about what it's claiming to believe in.

He thinks that, thinks that, thinks that, acknowledges that the spiritual life is a battle. And in any battle, good intelligence is vital.

The easiest way to lose a battle is to underestimate the strength or cunning of your enemy. Seems that Putin didn't understand how strong the resistance would be in Ukraine.

We don't know what's going to happen there, but it's a thing we always tend to do, isn't it? We think our enemy is wrong and therefore we underestimate him or her, as the case may be, or it's demons, as it talks about in verse 1.

[3:43] In fact, I would suggest to you that in verse 1 of our passage here, we have an application of Murphy's Law, which is endorsed by the Holy Spirit himself.

He says, he warns us that it's possible to abandon sound doctrine, and the Spirit warns us that it will happen. He doesn't say, don't worry, the Spirit will make sure it doesn't happen.

On the contrary, he warns us, the Spirit says that this will happen. You need to be on the watch for it. You need to be on the lookout. Don't underestimate the determination and strength of the enemy.

In fact, the interesting thing about Murphy's Law is that it doesn't state why the process will go wrong.

It doesn't have to. It might be a matter of enemy action, as it seems to be in verse 1 here. Or it might just be inattention and message drift.

[4:50] It seems to be more the case of Paul's second warning in verse 7. It just says that given the right circumstances, if it can go wrong, it will.

And we need to be prepared to pour it. You'll notice something remarkable here. In verse 9, we get the repetition of Paul's formula.

This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Where did he use this phrase before?

Well, he used it for that glorious statement that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst.

Paul almost seems to be saying here that what I'm telling you now is perhaps as important. Difficult to say he can mean that, but he's giving it the same emphasis, isn't he?

He's saying this is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Because translators and interpreters differ exactly what he's referring to in verse 9.

[6:01] Is he talking about verse 8, the training? Or is he talking about verse 10, the striving and hoping, which are those of the statement that deserves full acceptance?

Depending on which version of the NIV you're reading, you'll find it's different in the two versions, actually. The old NIV attaches the phrase to verse 10, the striving and hoping.

The new one puts a full stop after verse 9, making it refer to verse 8, and makes verse 10 into an explanation. But never mind.

We're not quite sure what Paul means here, but either way, we train and strive and hope to maintain the spiritual health of the church. And Paul's talking about training here.

And when he's talking about training, of course, he's talking about the human body, isn't he? A favorite analogy of Paul for the church. A human body is a very complex system, a very complicated system.

[7:09] When things go wrong, it's often difficult to find out exactly what the problem is. It's very sometimes not easy to find out what is going wrong.

So it's not surprising that Paul uses it to emphasize the need for a spiritual health check. And that's what we have, isn't it, in verse 8. He says, yes, exercise is good, but spiritual exercise is better. So, diet and exercise. Have you managed to keep fit during the pandemic? It's not easy, is it, I must say, when you're shut in.

Have you kept on top of your diet or have you been binging on comfort food? Have you managed to get plenty of exercise? It's always a good idea to do a health check every now and again, isn't it?

That's exactly what Paul says in verse 8. But of course, what Paul is really recommending to Timothy here is not that he keeps up his exercise, his visits to the gym and his exercise regime, although he does need to do that as a pastor.

[8:31] He needs to keep fit. But more importantly, of course, he's recommending that Timothy does a spiritual health check. Now, how relevant is that to us if we're not Timothy?

We can think of Paul here as a coach, isn't he? He's checking up on his protege's training schedule. It's particularly important for Timothy, I guess, because Timothy is going to be a trainer himself.

Paul says this that we didn't read in verse 11 and 12. But Paul is training up Timothy to be a trainer himself. Now, if you go to the gym and want to find a personal trainer, you're not going to choose one who's obviously unfit and healthy themselves, are you?

So it's perhaps particularly important for the leaders of a church to have a spiritual health check. But actually, we can all benefit from it, can't we?

So if you're not a deacon or a pastor or otherwise, even if you're not in a position of leadership, please don't think this doesn't apply to you. Because all of us are benefiting from keeping spiritually fit.

[9:55] But if you have been trying to stay healthy during the pandemic, you will have come up against a problem, won't you? How on earth do we

trust for reliable information? Do we listen to the government?

Do we listen to the BBC? Do we listen to the influencers on Instagram and TikTok? Do we take notice of the anti-vaxxers waving their banners?

Do we take notice of the anti-vaxxers waving their banners? And of course, even in normal times, the media are awash with scams, aren't they? Unsubstantiated rumors.

Jokes that get taken seriously. And pundits of varying expertise. And plus, just plain malicious fake news.

One thing we've seen in the news recently is that even the experts, even the professional scientists and the journalists disagree.

[11:01] It's quite easy to open your newspaper and find two articles in the same paper that contradict each other, that give different advice. And if this is true for health advice, which is, as it were, the wisdom of this world, who can you possibly trust when it comes to spiritual advice?

Those demons, in verse 1, are keeping themselves busy. But actually, of course, we see from verse 1 that this isn't a new phenomenon.

Fake news existed in Paul's day. It's just that the internet spreads it quicker. But there were always those who were peddling dodgy data.

Why did they do it? Well, for various reasons. Sometimes it's up for greed. They want to get money. Sometimes it's to get power over others, as rather seems to be the case in verse 2 here.

Or sometimes it's just a desire to be thought wise and important, as it seems to be the case in verse 7. But whatever the reason for this dodgy data is fake news, how can we be on the watch for it?

[12:29] How do you identify fake news? Well, it's necessary to understand, isn't it?

You need to explain. In verse 4, Paul explains what's wrong with the arguments that have been put forward in verses 1 and 2, or the people peddling that news.

If you understand, you have a better chance of fixing the flaws that you haven't noticed yet. And if you're prepared for something to go wrong, then you're on the lookout.

Scammers target the unwatchful, don't they? They catch you when you're half asleep or stressed in some other way. Scammers target the unwatchful.

So we need to look closely at these two examples that Paul has given us so we can apply this insight to ourselves today. And we need to get to the root of these two warnings.

[13:37] And I would suggest there are actually two warnings here, although Paul kind of runs them together. I think there are actually two ways that things can go wrong here. I'd like to look at the two separately.

And the two headings I've got are one, we're going to look at the subtle error, super spirituality, and then the lazy error, spiritual flabbiness. Now of course we don't exactly know what teachers Paul was talking about.

Was it the Judaizers who wanted to retain Jewish food and circumcision laws? Was it Greek philosophers who regarded marriage as unspiritual, although not necessarily sex, it has to be said, but who regarded marriage as a spiritual hindrance?

And of course one has to be careful here, this is subtle. Under the old law, Jews did indeed have food and other laws that marked them out as distinctive.

And again, there's no argument that says you have to get married. Quite the reverse. We know that Jesus himself in Mark 19, 12 said that some have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven.

[15:08] And after all, neither Paul nor Jesus were married. At least as far as we know, Paul wasn't married. You get the impression that he wasn't. You don't have to be married to be spiritual.

But the point is, you don't have to be unmarried to be spiritual either. Such teachings, Paul says, come through hypocritical liars whose consciousness have been seared as with a hot iron.

It's a bit strong that, isn't it? What is the problem that demands such a condemnation? The error here, I think, is a subtle one but a deadly one.

And it's what we nowadays call super-spirituality. I'm not sure who coined that phrase. It might have been Edith Schaeffer who I think wrote a book called that. But one of the Schaeffers wrote a book called that.

I don't know whether they invented the phrase. But it's a good description. What is super-spirituality? It's a perception that's keeping of certain rules and practices, usually external rules and practices, or a sign of spiritual maturity.

[16:22] Whereas, in fact, as Paul is saying, they're often a sign of spiritual pride, a holier-than-thou mentality. The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.

And the result is a seared conscience, verse 2. History has shown this to be true, isn't it? Almost any practice can be made into a source of spiritual pride.

Puritans banned Christmas. Some charismatics make tongue-speaking the evidence of being filled with the Spirit. Some, on the Reformed side, insist on compliance with some obscure doctrine or practice as an evidence of elite holiness.

Well, I won't give examples. You can imagine them yourself. Paul describes these things as hypocritical.

In doing so, he's only following the teaching of Jesus himself, isn't he? Remember, Jesus said in Luke 11, 46, you experts of the law, woe to you because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

[17:46] That was Jesus' judgment on the Pharisees who regarded holiness as an external thing. Their practices made them better and holier than everybody else.

Jesus said they were just putting burdens on the shoulders of those who could not uphold them. It is quite a subtle error, this.

But it's an important one because if you do fall into it your conscience suffers a burnout is what your conscience suffers a burnout is what Paul says.

So let's think about a particular example and I take this one because it's one that we do think about from time to time. One I know that in our church here we have different practices.

Some people don't drink alcohol others will drink alcohol. So let's think about that just for a minute. Not because I think it's the most important one in many ways but it's perhaps a way just to get a handle on this mode of thinking and how it can easily go astray.

[18:58] In some circumstances some Christian workers may decide it's better to abstain from alcohol altogether.

Clearly if you're working with addicts of one sort or another or in certain circumstances where alcohol addiction is a certain societies where alcohol addiction is a major problem it's probably better to abstain altogether.

But we mustn't forget what God said in Psalm 104 He makes grass grow for the cattle plants a man to cultivate bringing forth food from the earth wine that gladdens the heart of man oil to make his face shine and bread that sustains his heart.

whether you take alcohol or not it's necessary that you make that choice in faith and you give thanksgiving to God but whichever your view is the moment you start looking down on the other you've slipped into the error of super spirituality which is just really another name for hypocrisy.

Now again as I say we need to be careful here Paul is not saying that sin is acceptable drunkenness is a sin scripture is absolutely clear about that the question is how you avoid that sin in this case do you avoid it by abstention or do you avoid it by moderation so Christians or evangelical Christians are often accused of that isn't it Paul's well aware of that in Romans 6 verse 1 and to 2 he says what shall we say then shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase by no means we died to sin how can we live in it any longer what God has declared to be wrong is sin drunkenness is certainly a sin and we must avoid it but verses 4 and 5 of our passage reveal the truth it's what you declare to be a sin is the issue here

[21:32] God created marriage God created food wine and God declared them good sometimes it might be beneficial to abstain for spiritual reasons but that doesn't make those things unspiritual in themselves why is that because on the contrary they are consecrated by the word and prayer Paul says what does that mean well formally by the word of God God declared

these things good also by prayer if you give thanks so it's formally by the word of God and in our experience by the prayer of thanksgiving do we remember to say grace before meals do we give thanks for what God has given because that is part of consecrating the gift and saying what God has said is good is good we give thanks for it so that's the subtle error that

Paul warns us against here then again there's the lazy error and I think he's getting at something slightly different in verse seven as he described it as he says had nothing to do with godless myths and old wise tales so if the problem in verses one to three is super spirituality in verse seven it seems to be more one of spiritual flabbiness the athlete must train in order to be fit for the games these godless myths and old wise tales stand for the rumours and the half truths and sometimes the outright lies that circulate by gossip in Paul's day they circulated by gossip nowadays of course we can circulate them much more efficiently on the internet people just drift into uncritical acceptance and that's why Paul is telling us to watch out an athlete training for the games needs a rigorous approach don't go to the gym and then listen to the half-baked theories for the guy who met in the changing room people who know what they're talking about you should be listening to you might not have noticed but there's a subtle change in the verbs that

Paul uses in verses one to six as I said the problem seems to be over scrupulousness and over this Paul almost tells Timothy to relax here doesn't he he says look at the verbs he uses he says point out he says you will be in the passive voice he says you were brought up in the faith so as to be calm and balanced but in the latter verses it's all active isn't it train reject labour strive a lazy athlete will not win the gold medal I'm not going to say so much about this lazy error I think it's probably self evident but what we need to do is just watch out for the scammers so that's the negatives that Paul has set out so what does Paul recommend that we do to avoid falling foul of Murphy's law it's clear enough isn't it we need to train to win

Paul is putting himself in the role of the coach here isn't he training his protégé in order to something that he already has a talent for but if he really wants to win the gold medal he needs to train coaching I'd suggest to you is a science at least it should be what will the coach say to the when something has gone wrong so you didn't do so well in that race let's study the video to work out what went wrong of course a good coach may sometimes criticize or crack the whip if his charge is indolent or distracted excited but in fact mostly the best method of coaching is encouragement isn't it look what went wrong we'll do it better next time don't panic we didn't win that time but don't panic we can analyze what went wrong and do it better the next time but what the coach can't tolerate is sloppy thinking or a lack of focus so here is Paul setting out the game plan for the coming competition you won't perform well if you don't train verse 8 but be sensible just because it hurts doesn't mean it's good for you it might do positive harm as verse 3 is telling us just because it hurts doesn't mean it's good for you watch out for that sort of thinking but effective training requires application and effort doesn't it it requires analysis and clear thinking Paul spells it out in a later letter to Timothy 2 Timothy 3 verses 16 and 17 those well and justifiably much quoted verses all scripture is God breathed and is useful for what for teaching rebuking correcting and training in righteousness so that the man and of course I hear or woman of course of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work how does this training work well it's word based the point that psalmist has made centuries earlier in psalm 1 blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked that's those guys in verse 1 of our passage verses 1 and 2 of our passage or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers maybe that's the guys in verse 7 but what does the blessed man do his delight is in the law of the lord and on his law he meditates day and night so what's

[28:49] Paul's advice to Timothy and to us trained to win don't sit around waiting for spiritual enlightenment we are to study to be fully competent craft people if you like experts in the use of spiritual tools trained to win understand and be on the watch out perhaps worth just making one point here I don't want to upset people and I can give perhaps the wrong impression but I don't want to do that but I just want to point out that effective training is multifaceted it's no good just doing one simple exercise a gentle jog each morning is of no benefit to the elite athlete serious time in the gym is required what I mean by this is just

don't think ten minutes each day reading your bible is doing the business it might be if you're seriously studying and engaging with it but sometimes it can be you can be not really engaged with it is it just an inconvenience before you get on with the day do you need to think about how you can study in more depth and more seriously how can you get the gym time in that you need maybe you should sign up for the gospel partnership training courses which are highly recommended for instance or of course in coming to church on a

Sunday morning and listening to the word preached you are of course training yourself to be godly so let's take this seriously let's remember and I have to say this to myself I've been a Christian for many years but it's so easy to slip into lazy habits isn't it training involves rigorous scientific application and constant review yet there must be a foundation principle on which it's based what is the microscope through which the Christian views every issue what is the foundation of this training that we need to undertake in the spiritual gym well he tells us in verse 10 doesn't he it's the hope that we have in the living God who is the saviour of all men especially of those who believe I did wonder whether to deal with this tricky question of what he means by especially those who believe but I think I won't I'll leave that for you to think about on your own but we are to keep be watchful why are we to be watchful because we have put our hope in the living God that's in the living God that salvation is to be found so let's brothers and sisters let's make sure that we train to win Amen Amen