

Keep the main thing the main thing

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[0 : 0 0] needs to be unpicked. This sermon is tricky because this section of the letter particularly feels so much more applicable to me than to all of you. Now it's good when a preacher has been grabbed first by the text when there's something in there of application to me that I'm then sharing or where God's Word has impacted me first before I bring it to you. But this one has been harder than most to work through how we consider this together, how it applies to us all. And maybe that's been made more acute for me by the fact that this last week or two I've been thinking back over my time here since I officially started in October, particularly because it was a year and a couple of weeks ago that I came here on placement for six weeks with, by the way, not the slightest thought of staying here longer than that. I've been thinking back to that ordination service in October and to the advice that Finley McKenzie, the convener of the Students Committee at Glasgow Presbytery, he gave me advice in that service. And most of you probably have not the faintest idea what that was because it was quite a while ago and it was one of quite a few speeches in quite a long service.

But he was kind enough to send me not long after his notes from what he'd said. And of the five things that he said to me, two of them came straight out of this passage. And as I've thought over them, there's another two that he could have brought from this passage as well, but that he kind of brought from other places. So clearly this passage has a lot to say to me as a young minister.

Is that then all that we need to do? Has this passage done its work because it's caused me to reflect this week? Well, hopefully not quite. Let's walk through a few points of this passage together and we'll try and do a little bit of both, shall we? I think hopefully it will be of some use for you to see how this has had an impact on me, but also how it will have an impact on our life as a church together. And because I think there are also advice and cautions for us all as we go through.

I suspect that this passage could usefully be summarized in that quote from Stephen Covey of the seven habits of highly effective people, that quote that I've used as the title, the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. That I think is Paul's encouragement to Timothy here, that this passage is about prioritization. And Paul is coming at that from two different angles. Firstly, he's advising Timothy to enable people to focus on the main thing, to get rid of distractions from the main thing. Secondly, he advises him to devote himself to the main thing. And then thirdly, he encourages him in that focus by talking about what the results of that focus on the main thing should be. So first, to enable people to focus on the main thing.

This is verse 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. Now, I think this verse is quite often misused. I remember as a teenager being really quite fond of this verse. And I remember being encouraged in that as well. I'm sure I was given several cards with this printed on, and I think I may even have had a t-shirt with it. But the thing is, most of those cards and so on, they stopped halfway through the verse. Or at the very least, my memory of them stops halfway through.

[3 : 5 4] I was quite fond of the instruction not to let people look down on me. But I didn't quite get to the idea that being listened to would be something to be earned by setting an example.

It's also a misuse of this passage because Timothy is not, at the point that Paul's writing to him, a teenager. The word young here probably refers to anyone up to about the age of 40 or thereabouts.

Best guess, Timothy at this point is in his mid-30s. Now, still young by comparison to others in his congregation, by comparison to Paul himself, but not quite who we mean usually when we talk about young people today, is it?

Too often this verse is misused to encourage arrogant teenagers like the 14-year-old me. So Paul isn't commending cockiness, but he is addressing a very real problem. He's addressing a perennial problem. John Stott says, older people have always found it difficult to accept young people as responsible adults in their own right, let alone as leaders. And young people are understandably irritated when their elders keep reminding them of their immaturity and inexperience and treat them with contempt. I didn't go and check what age John Stott was when he wrote that, but I suspect he was not a young man at that stage.

This is a very real problem, isn't it? And I agree that it is still a problem today, but I think we also have the opposite problem today. And maybe we have the opposite problem more than they did in Paul's day, because today there is a rising contempt for the elderly, I think. Today, older generations are often not seen as having wisdom accumulated over many years, so much as being seen as being out of touch, irrelevant to modern life, and unable to keep up with today's globally connected world. Too often we have that opposite problem. We've seen that over the last couple of years with the Brexit vote, haven't we? In which over 65s were more than twice as likely as under 25s to vote leave. Old people voted leave, young people voted remain. And the narrative among too many younger commentators is often pretty close to, how dare those old people take us out of the EU? They're not going to have to deal with the consequences of that decision. Now, whatever you think about Brexit, I hope we can agree that that kind of contempt is unseemly. So Paul is not commending an upending of who ought to be seen as wise, who ought to be seen as leading. He's not saying, ignore age and experience, let's have youth instead. That's not what he's commending.

[6 : 46] No, I think the model is something more like what we read about of Elihu in the book of Job. Elihu comes on the scene in chapter 32. After the first three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shu'ite, and Zophar the Naamathite, they've all had their say, and Eliphaz appears in Job 32. Let's read a few verses of that together. So these three men stopped answering Job because he was righteous in his own eyes. But Elihu, son of Barakel the Buzite of the family of Ram, became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God. He was also angry with the three friends because they had found no way to refute Job and yet had condemned him. Now, Elihu had waited before speaking to Job because they were older than he. But when he saw that the three men had nothing more to say, his anger was aroused. So Elihu, son of Barakel the Buzite, said, I am young in years and you are old. That is why I was fearful, not daring to tell you what I know. I thought, age should speak, advanced years should teach wisdom. But it is the spirit in a person, the breath of the Almighty, that gives them understanding. It is not only the old who are wise, not only the aged who understand what is right.

Therefore, I say, listen to me. I too will tell you what I know. I waited while you spoke. I listened to your reasoning while you were searching for words. I gave you my full attention. But not one of you has proved Job wrong. None of you has answered his arguments. So Eliphaz there in his conversation with Job and the other friends, he rightly identifies that it ought to be the case that advanced years teach wisdom. But he also recognizes the more fundamental fact in verse 8. It is the spirit in a person, the breath of the Almighty, that gives them understanding. So that's why here in this letter, Paul can tell Timothy that his youth is not a barrier to his role as a leader because Timothy is endowed with the Holy Spirit who gives understanding. Now there's those two parallel instructions in verse 12.

Don't let anyone look down on you and set an example. And the first is addressed to Timothy. But surely, as with so much of this letter, it is in many ways designed to be overheard.

It's an implicit instruction to the Ephesian church, isn't it? And perhaps especially to its appointed elders, an instruction not to look down on Timothy because of his youth. So it's designed to be overheard. But I also think it's deliberate that it's addressed to Timothy. Because the point is not that Timothy should go and demand respect. The point is that Timothy is to be a model who invites a following, not some kind of boss who compels one. Timothy is not to go and demand his rights, demand to be listened to. The second instruction comes hot on the heels of the first. Timothy is to be exemplary. So to all of us, let me say, let us not look down on the young. For sure, let us not despise the elderly. Rather, let us have as our criterion true wisdom and true godliness. And let me say to my 14-year-old self and any other 14-year-olds who might be listening, if you want people not to look down on you because you are young, if you want to be taken seriously, then listen carefully to the second half of this verse. Because if you are exemplary in your speech and in your conduct and in your love and your faith and your purity, if you are exemplary in those things, then you may rightly expect people to take notice of what you have to say. But by contrast, the false teachers in Ephesus have shown that they ought not to be listened to because they lack true wisdom. Because they have shown that by their complete failure to be any kind of an example in these key areas.

So Paul deals with that potential barrier to Timothy being listened to. Paul gives him then further advice as he moves on. What is the main thing to devote himself to? Well, here we come to verses 13 through 16. Timothy is to devote himself to reading, to preaching, to teaching. He is to be diligent in these matters and he is to watch his life and doctrine closely. So there in verse 13, Paul identifies three key elements of an effective ministry. Reading of Scripture, preaching, and teaching.

[12 : 02] And the difference there in those latter two between preaching and teaching. In this instance, the difference is between on the one hand an emphasis on exhortation to obedience, kind of commending following what God has said on the one hand, and then the other translated here teaching, a focus on instruction in what is true. So that's the distinction between the two, but they're not meant to be pulled apart, of course. In many ways, these are two sides of the same coin, and two sides worth preserving both of. Because I imagine most of you, like me, can think of sermons which have veered far too far towards one, and other sermons that have veered far too far the other way.

A call to action that is not rooted in understanding is a dangerous thing. And information without a drive to change is a waste of time. Neither alone is sufficient. We must have both of these elements together. But before that, the order is deliberate here, isn't it?

Before preaching and teaching comes the reading of Scripture. The authority for what follows for the preaching and the teaching starts there. The grounding for exhortation, the grounding of teaching must start in the Word. Because it is so easy to go off on tangents, to preach a hobby horse, not the text that's in front of you. So easy to get distracted instead of focusing on God's Word.

Probably most of you will remember my friend Innes, who came to do the baptism back in February. About this time last year, he posted this tweet that has stuck with me.

It's always a temptation of mine when reading a book to mentally skip past the scriptural quotes. So daft, those are the words of power.

[13 : 59] I keep coming back to that tweet in my mind because I know I face exactly that same temptation. I face it when I'm reading books as I think, I know that bit, and skip on to the new idea.

I face that same temptation when I come and prepare to preach. And I wonder what new insight you need to hear. I face that temptation when I am out and about seeing people, and when I'm sitting with somebody who's struggling.

Struggling with whatever it may be. And I find myself thinking that what this person really needs is my wisdom. Is my insight. Is my perspective. Maybe I'm not so much less arrogant now than I was at 14 as I would like to think I am.

Friends, the response to these temptations must be the same. The book I'm reading is only useful insofar as it leads me to a better understanding of God's Word.

Whatever insight comes in my preaching must be rooted in God's Word. What the struggling individual in front of me needs is not my insight. It is God's Word.

[15 : 11] Now, Paul is particularly talking to Timothy in terms of his public ministry here. He's talking about Timothy as a church leader. He's talking about their meetings when they gather together.

He's talking about the public reading of Scripture and so on. Well, those same principles do come out in parallel in other areas, don't they? They come through in the private teaching of fellowship at home.

And if that's true, then that means they apply to all of us, doesn't it? Because if we are a family together, if we are concerned for one another, if we have a collective responsibility to teach and rebuke and to correct and to train one another, then we need that same basis.

We need to be reminded that all of that must build on the bedrock of Scripture, on the basis of what God has said. So that is a caution.

It's a caution to me and to you not to head off down the wrong line, not to go off on tangents, not to depend on other sources of wisdom. It's a caution.

[16 : 15] But it's also an encouragement. It's an encouragement because it means you can do it. Not many of us are trained psychotherapists, are we?

If what helping one another depended on was our insight, was our ability to know the best possible thing to say, if helping one another depended on our wisdom, none of us would have a hope of helping one another, would we?

But if helping one another depends on God's Word, if what your friend needs is what God has said, well, that you can do, can't you?

Before we move on to the expected results of keeping the main thing the main thing, let me mention one other aspect of what Paul encourages Timothy to do, and that's there in the beginning of verse 16.

Watch your life and doctrine closely. And I think the thing to notice here is that the two go hand in hand, life and doctrine.

[17 : 20] The false teachers were falling down on both fronts. Their morality had gone all to pot, and they were leading people astray with their wrong doctrine. And often we can think, we can think that what really matters is believing the right thing, is having our doctrine straight.

Maybe this is particularly acute for young ministers straight out of college, who have spent a number of years being instructed on how to get our doctrine straight. And with the best will in the world, have had rather less instruction on having our lives in order.

And that can leave us with a somewhat warped view of what's important. But Paul does not allow that disconnect. Paul will not allow life and doctrine to be separated from one another.

He has no time for the correct teaching with a mess of a life behind it. I think one reason he will not allow that disconnect is that to keep a close watch on your life will guard against self-righteousness in doctrine, will guard against the kind of legalism, will guard against the kind of arrogance, will guard against the kind of pride that allow somebody to stand and tell people how they are wrong with never a thought for how the preacher himself is wrong.

Paul does not allow that disconnect. And the second reason for that is that solid preaching can be put to the lie by a life that does not match up.

- [18 : 53] Robert Murray McChain, preaching on this same passage at an ordination service, he gave the following advice. Point four, lead a holy life.

Study universal holiness of life. Your whole usefulness depends on this. Your sermon on Sabbath lasts but an hour or two. Your life preaches all the week.

Remember, ministers are standard bearers. Satan aims his fiery darts at them. If he can only make you a covetous minister or a lover of pleasure or a lover of praise or a lover of good eating, then he has ruined your ministry forever.

Let him preach on 50 years. He will never do me any harm. Dear brother, cast yourself at the feet of Christ. Just implore his spirit to make you a holy man.

Take heed to thyself and to thy doctrine. Rather more succinctly, he's quoted as saying, my people's greatest need is my personal holiness.

- [20 : 02] Sadly, that's one of those quotes that gets bandied around a lot, but nobody actually seems to be sure whether he actually said it. But he certainly did say that first thing, which is more or less the same idea.

Friends, at last year's General Assembly, a week ago last year, we were dealing with the fallout of one failed ministry. And at this year's Assembly, we suspended another minister who had previously resigned his charge because of his failing in his life.

And both of these men, both of these men had stood in the pulpit for years, for decades, teaching wonderfully sound doctrine, well regarded in the church, teaching God's word, apparently faithfully.

But they did not keep watch over their lives. Sound doctrine must match with a close watch on one's life.

And that brings us on to point number three. Why do we do these things? Why do we keep the main thing the main thing? Why do we keep a close watch? Well, Paul tells Timothy at the end of verse 15 that everyone will see his progress.

- [21 : 24] And he tells him in verse 16 that by persevering in these things, he will save both himself and his hearers. Now, Paul's not attributing salvation to anyone other than God.

He's just saying that it is ordinarily by the preaching of the gospel that people are gathered to Christ. Calvin says, God parts with no portion of his glory when he employs the agency of men for bestowing salvation.

It is all of God. Paul's not going anywhere near saying anything other than that. But he is saying, it is normally through the preaching. It is normally through seeing the lives of Christians, of perhaps the minister particularly, that people come to faith.

So why does Timothy keep a close watch on his life and his doctrine? Because preaching changes people. Because preaching brings people to a recognition of their need for salvation.

Because preaching shows people how they are to progress in the Christian life. And because preaching is put to a lie by a life that does not match up.

- [22 : 33] So what do we do with that? Well, firstly, please will you pray for me? This is scary. And secondly, yes, Paul is speaking to Timothy as the pastor of the church.

That's true. But he says to Timothy that everyone will see his progress, verse 15. He doesn't say the believers will see his progress. He doesn't say the saints will see his progress. So I don't think Paul is only thinking of Timothy as an example to the church.

I think he's thinking of the witness of a life lived before a watching world. And he's commending that to Timothy. He's expecting the whole world to see Timothy in the life that he lives.

He's expecting the whole of Ephesus to see Timothy. Now that's a scary thought. But I suggest it also generalizes this. Because I suggest that most of the people you know their idea of a Christian is not going to be formed by me.

For each of you most of the people who you know their idea for a Christian will be formed by watching you. And by some people on TV and by some dodgy tele-evangelists and so on.

[23 : 50] So you've got some backlog to catch up on in showing them what a Christian is like. The number of people who will know me personally well enough to see my progress is not huge.

If we are going to make an impact on this valley we will need more examples. So if I can slightly take liberties with Paul's language and generalize his point somewhat.

Brothers and sisters guard your life and doctrine closely that your friends may see your progress. Persevere in these things because if you do you will save both yourself and your friends.

Let's pray. Lord God thank you that you have spoken in your word.

Thank you that you are speaking through it today. Thank you that we have all the foundation that we need. That we have all we need to model our lives.

[25 : 01] That we have all we need to form our doctrine. thank you that you have given us your word to guide us and to direct us.

Lord as we all of us seek to live a life that is worth watching as we seek to live a life that is honoring to you before a world that so often knows nothing of you but what they see in us.

Lord would you help us to take that responsibility seriously to seek to honor and glorify you for our salvation and for that of our friends.

In Jesus name Amen.