

The Priority of Pastoral Ministry

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[0:00] Good morning, church family. Good morning. My name is Luke Fawcett. Most of you know me by now. I'm the pastoral intern here at Maranatha.

I've been really grateful to serve here since May. I am honored and eager to open God's Word together. The title of the message this morning is The Priority of Pastoral Ministry.

The Priority of Pastoral Ministry. And the text this morning is 1 Timothy 4. If you're looking at your pew Bibles in front of you, you can find our passage on page 992.

Page 992. Follow along as I read the whole chapter. Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times, some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.

Through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

[1:18] For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving. For it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. Have nothing to do with irreverent silly myths.

Rather, train yourself for 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 light to come.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving 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 people, especially of those who believe.

Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

[2:28] Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.

Practice these things. Immerse yourself in them. So that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching.

Persist in this. For by so doing, you will save both yourself and your hearers. Our text this morning sets out to answer a single question from many angles.

What does ministry depend on? What does ministry depend on? You see, up to this point, the young pastor, Timothy, has received a number of charges from the apostle Paul concerning the ministry.

Timothy must correct these teachers who love to discuss ideas but don't arrive at the truth. Stop speculating. Start stewarding. Chapter 1, verses 3-7.

[3:41] Timothy must maintain church discipline of Hymenaeus and Alexander. Known members of the church. Chapter 1, verses 18-20. Timothy must also call the men to stop quarreling and start praying.

Chapter 2, verse 8. Timothy must call the women likewise to quit their spotlighting of their clothes and their styles and start setting the example of good works.

Chapter 2, verses 9-10. Timothy must instruct the church to raise up men of character, not popularity, not persuasion, who will lead the church in sound doctrine and faithfulness to Jesus. And then, at the center of it all, Timothy must uphold the gospel of Jesus Christ as this glue that binds the church together as the household of faith and as the pillar of the truth.

Chapter 3, verses 16-18. In light of all of this, how is Timothy to fulfill the ministry?

[4 : 51] What does ministry depend on? There are a number of answers that we could come up with. Maybe ministry depends on a comprehensive knowledge of the scripture.

You have to understand the Bible to be able to refute false teachers. And certainly, pastors must know their Bibles. Maybe ministry depends on doctrinal clarity.

You can't teach men and women how to fulfill their roles if you don't know your ecclesiology and your anthropology. Certainly, pastors must be able to teach.

Maybe ministry depends on cultural awareness, knowing the politics and the pitfalls of leadership and how to avoid them. And certainly, pastors must understand the world that they live in and minister in.

Maybe ministry depends on skill and counsel or care for the body. And later, Paul will go on to tell Timothy how to instruct elders and widows.

[5 : 52] Certainly, pastors must know and love their people. And there are many other qualities that could be added to the list. Pastors must have their families in order.

They should have a healthy marriage. And their communication must be sharp. On and on, we could probably come up with an endless list of things that ministry could depend on.

And the reality is that 1 Timothy commends all these responsibilities for pastors. They have to know their Bibles. They have to be able to teach. They have to have their families in order.

But what does ministry depend on? What will make or break a pastor, a leader, or a parent?

Amid the dangers and demands of ministry, there is one central concern. Make progress in godliness. That is what ministry depends on.

[6 : 56] Make progress in godliness. And that is the main idea of the message today. So beginning in verse 1, we see point 1. perilous departures in ministry.

Perilous departures in ministry. Last week, Andrew emphasized the nature of the church, this pillar and buttress of the truth.

Chapter 3, verse 15. And it's in fact our confession of scripture that centers on the person and work of Christ. He is the center of our confession.

He is what gives the church its shape and its form. We must not move past that too quickly.

Because there is no ministry, there is no progress apart from Jesus.

And if we deviate from Jesus, we actually deviate from the faith. That's where we find ourselves in the outset of our text. Verse 1. Some will depart from the faith, Paul says.

[8 : 01] If making progress in godliness is the focus of our text in primarily verses 6 to 16, then verses 1 to 5 provide the background for it.

It's the situation and outcome here contrast with, and then they emphasize the necessity of godliness. Just take note of some of the stark contrasts in the language.

Some will depart from the faith, verse 1, is set against you will save yourself and your hearers.

Verse 16. Devote themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.

Verse 1. It's set against devote yourself, Timothy, to the public reading of scripture, to exhortation and to teaching. Verse 13. Through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.

Verse 2. It's set against you will be a good servant of Jesus Christ, being trained in the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine. The danger of departure is real.

[9 : 08] And the necessity of godliness is paramount. The text says that those who have departed have devoted themselves to these teachings.

These teachings described as deceptive and demonic. And these descriptive words indicate that ideas are not just conceptual. Ideas are intrinsically spiritual.

You see, we live in an age where information is everything. It's almost a glut of information that we have access to. So many ideas and it's hard to sift the tasteful from the poisonous.

Right? We have media, podcasts, messages, streaming. And just one minute of scrolling TikTok or Instagram reels, we might have consumed 20 different videos without really understanding what it is that we're watching or listening to.

I was actually in a restaurant not too long ago, literally went into the bathroom and there was a TV in front of me. I was like, this is the weirdest thing. Why am I watching TV while I'm going to the bathroom?

[10 : 23] But the reality is we cannot get away from it. There is this inundation of entertainment and information. And it's not that entertainment or information is inherently evil or demonic or antithetical

to God.

It's that overconsumption of information begins to dull your mind and your conscience away from discernment. Our culture packages ideas in a way that makes it nearly impossible to think about what we're watching.

So Timothy, information is not just information. In our passage, the teachers and the listeners are not just intellectually deceived. They are spiritually bankrupt.

And here's what's shocking to me. The idea that they followed after is not a denial of the humanity of Christ. It's not a denial of his resurrection, even though we see that in other places.

It's that they forbid food and marriage. This departure from the faith is not by leaving the church. It's by leaving the doctrines that demonstrate the sufficiency of Christ in salvation.

[11:36] That's where the departure has taken place. You see, they're promoting this physical abstinence, but the problem is not in singleness. It's not in fasting.

Jesus was a single man, and yet he commended marriage as God's design. Jesus also spent time fasting, and yet he went to dinner parties and he enjoyed weddings.

But even so, food and marriage are not ends in themselves. For Paul will soon assert that bodily training is actually of some value. So what are we to make of this departure?

What is Paul's point here? It's that abstinence and enjoyment are not the point. Treasuring Christ is. To abstain or to enjoy means little if Jesus is not the reason.

And we can think about endless examples in our own culture, our own context for this. Why set the alarm earlier versus sleep in? Why eat at McDonald's versus choose the salad bar?

[12:43] Why sit with your friends versus pursue the friend list? Why read John Piper versus watching your favorite TV show? Or serve on a Sunday versus spending it with your family?

You see, we may look spiritual and feel spiritual if that is all the substance of our action. If we're just pursuing another thing without making any progress in godliness.

godliness. So what is going to get you right with God? And what is going to keep you right with God? How do we make progress in godliness?

The answer is that the same thing that gets you right with God is the same thing that keeps you right with God. It's faith in the sufficiency of Christ. It's not a form.

It's not a regulation. It's not a goal. It's not even progress itself. The problem was that these people were promoting this performance-based kind of spiritual life.

[13:49] Disciplining the body was, disciplining the body by denying it pleasure had become the main strategy for gaining favor with God. And in doing so, they had departed from Jesus.

There is much, I think, in this small section of Scripture for sinners and saints who struggle with embodiment.

Many of us, I think, want a different image. Food and mirrors and pleasure have just lost their taste. Many of us struggle with the decay of the body.

even while we live and our bodies seem to betray every effort we make at working to sustain them. So what are we to do with the corruption of our bodies?

Is it better to eat or not to eat? What are we to do with body image and the decay of everything? Jesus understands the difficult.

[15:01] Jesus understands the difficulty of embodiment. When Hebrews says that he became like us in every way, it wasn't a figure of speech. That was Jesus' life.

Matthew says that foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Jesus hungered. Jesus felt exhausted from the constant demands of the crowd.

He understood pressure. Pressure from enemies. Pressure from authorities. Pressure from family. Pressure from friends.

Pressure from his disciples. Pressure from temptation. And pressure from success. And always the unrelenting pressure of this journey to Jerusalem where he would break his body and spill his blood for our forgiveness and redemption.

But here's the good news. Jesus is alive. His bodily resurrection ensures our bodily resurrection.

[16:12] Very soon we will meet Jesus or he will meet us. And this is how Paul says it. We shall not all sleep, that is, die, but we shall all be changed.

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, for the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable and we shall be changed.

For this perishable body must put on the imperishable and this mortal body must put on immortality. that is good news for saints and sinners who struggle with the body.

We've observed perilous departures in ministry, now let's turn to the private life and the public activity of faithful ministry. So point number two, private life in ministry.

Private life in ministry. Let's look again at verse six. Paul says this, If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.

[17 : 24] This conditional statement hinges on what these things are. Whatever these things are, that's the condition. And it's repeated again in verse 11.

Paul says, Command and teach these things. So what does these things refer to? I would argue that the things that Paul tells Timothy to shepherd the church in are the same things that he's been instructing him with all along.

It's the whole of the letter, which this previous section illustrates. It's this relationship between doctrine and godliness, or doctrine and the gospel that leads to this Christian life and this devotion to Jesus.

Look again at the purpose statement in 3:14. He says that I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and a buttress of the truth.

And that truth that the church upholds is the gospel. That's the next confession that you hear in verse 16. You see, it's Christ that makes teaching Christian.

[18 : 38] That's why the servant imagery for Christian ministry I think is so helpful. We often think of a servant as someone who completes the right tasks. So you help your mom with the dishes, or you shovel the driveway for your neighbor.

But being a servant is not just a responsibility. It is an identity. It is who you are. The metaphor might be more clear if we exchange servant for slave.

It's not a popular connotation for modern ears, but this is the meaning in biblical language. And the language communicates at least two realities. First, there is a master, Christ Jesus, who directs our life and our practice.

And second, there is this stewardship that we have received and that we're entrusted with to multiply. And that stewardship, I think, is the words of Christ itself.

It is the gospel. gospel. And that we multiply in relationships. I think these realities are at the heart of ministry.

[19 : 45] And that's why the next command is so important. Have nothing to do with irreverent silly myths. Rather, train yourself for godliness.

Honestly, I'm not sure what these myths refer to. But notice how it contrasts with godliness. not sound doctrine. Whatever these myths are, they're promoting this speculation, this love of ideas, but not a stewardship of what they've received.

Paul calls these vain discussions because they're characterized by this self-promotion, this building up of self. I want to be a teacher, and so I'll discuss these things. Knowing the right things is what seems to get you into the inner circle.

people. Or having the right heritage and the right family background gives you status with God's people. But that is not how a good steward thinks. A steward doesn't sit around discussing how to most effectively run the master's business.

He gets to work running it. He does the work. He invests and he risks so that his master can get a reward. He's not concerned about himself.

[20 : 58] His main concern is the commendation of his master. Godly people find their worth in God, not in their success, not in their growth, not in their heritage, or their position, or their knowledge.

But in fact, godliness is not an end to itself. Look at verse 10. For to this end we toil and strive. Why? Because we have our hope set on godliness?

No, on the living God who is the savior of all people, especially of those who believe. Souls are at stake in ministry.

We work for a particular end, the salvation and preservation of the people of God. And is there a better thing to work for?

What does money, position, and status mean if it's not moving us in the direction of knowing God and making him known? This end of salvation and preservation.

[22 : 13] And the promise and hope of salvation requires us to keep our eyes up and to look ahead to the goal of eternal life. when I was first learning how to drive, straight roads were pretty easy, but curves were tough.

Just a little kind of adjustment, teens, you probably know this, you're driving. A little adjustment makes a big difference, right? It's not like those arcade games that you're like spinning the wheel, right? for a while I could not make a smooth turn for the life of me.

But it was because I was like this, looking in between the lines and trying to stay centered. And there was something that my mom, who was helping me drive, used to repeat to me that made the difference.

She said, keep your eyes ahead of the curve. Keep your eyes ahead of the curve. Now that's pretty counterintuitive, right? I had to look ahead to stay centered.

But the Christian life is essentially that. It's staying centered on Jesus despite the curves of our flesh, the curves of the world, the curves of false teaching.

[23 : 27] And you actually, here's the counterintuitive reality. You have to look ahead to stay centered. You have to keep your eyes on eternity. to live well in the present.

That is how we make progress in godliness. But the picture of progress isn't a perfect image. I don't want to give you this rosy picture. We have an eternal enduring hope.

But life in this age is not easy. And I think that's why Paul gives this comparison to bodily training. He says in verse eight, for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way. Anyone who understands or has tried to exercise and train their body knows that it requires strenuous effort over time. Strenuous effort over time.

Just the daily effort to get up and go to the gym or get on your cycle or go jog around the block is not easy. And literally, when you're working out, you're tearing your muscles so that they can build themselves back up.

[24 : 41] I mean, who wants to do that? Maybe some weird people, but they enjoy the tearing. But no, it's the goal of growth. It's the goal of getting better.

better. And the thing is that over time, you actually see your muscles grow.

You actually see them get toned. And then those things that you don't really want to talk about, they lessen. And I think it's the same with making progress in godliness. It requires us to take our hearts and our habits to Jesus again and again and again in repentance and faith, saying, Lord, help me to please you.

But this is the good news, that over time, Jesus actually becomes better in our hearts. We actually want it because we're growing.

Our muscles, our spiritual muscles are getting better, and we say, you know what? The flesh, that's not even worth it. Anger, that's destructive.

[25 : 48] Lust, it's damaging. I don't want it. Jesus is better. So this effort at godliness in the private life will inevitably shape the ministry activity in public.

And that's the third point, public activity and ministry. Public activity and ministry. Paul here is essentially giving two commands.

don't get discouraged, but set the example. And don't neglect the gift, but devote yourself to teaching. It's these two responsibilities that I think make up ministry.

This imitation and instruction. Imitation and instruction. The question isn't will people watch you?

The question is what kind of example will they see?

What kind of example are we setting? Pastor Bobby Jameson in his book, The Path to Being a Pastor, puts it this way. I think it's both true and kind of funny. The day you start serving as pastor is the day that everyone starts watching you.

[27 : 02] And that's true. If you've been in any kind of leadership role, you know that imitation is inevitable. We cannot get away from setting an example. people. And parents probably know this better than most.

Right? Children do what they see more than what they hear. We think, man, why is this kid so angry and selfish? And he's just using his words like weapons?

And I'm like, that must be me. Oh no. I need to change. I had this problem with my younger brother. I wasn't a parent obviously, but I grew up in a big family.

There's a lot of imitation between siblings. And occasionally as a kid, I would get into a freezer because we had chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream that was just amazing. And I was like, you know, what's the harm in a few scoops, a few spoonfuls here and there? But one day I noticed my younger brother opening the freezer and taking out the ice cream and starting to eat it right as my mom is cooking dinner.

[28 : 07] I'm like, bro, you can't get into the ice cream right now. Don't you know that you're about to eat dinner and we need that for later? And you know what he said? You did it. I hate that.

But it was true, right? Like, I did it. He was right. See, imitation is inevitable. It is inevitable. So Timothy must set an example instead of just telling the church what to do.

And it's not actually man-centered for Timothy to say, follow me. This is how God has designed relationships, that we imitate those that we trust, those that we see their lives and we say, I want to be like that.

You know, I'm not sure where this person is going astray, where this, I can't articulate what the scripture says about this nuance, but it doesn't jive with the person that I've learned from.

I trust my parents and I don't know if I agree with what this person is saying. Sometimes the greatest defense against false doctrine and misplaced devotion is a godly example.

[29 : 19] A godly example. But imitation must be coupled with instruction. So Paul says in verse 13, until I come, devote yourself to public reading of scripture.

to exhortation and to teaching. What do these three things have in common? It's that they're centered on scripture. Read it, preach it, teach it, Timothy.

Those who want to make progress in godliness have to be people of the word. Because it's the word in which Jesus reveals himself to us. It's the word where he makes himself known.

And then verse 14 gives just the flip side of verse 13. Devote yourself to teaching and do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.

So he's telling Timothy, don't be apathetic. Don't neglect what you've received, this gift that's been given. Now there are a lot of Bible readers who differ on what this gift is.

[30 : 27] The New American Standard Version actually translates this spiritual gift. But most Bible readers or translators just leave it as gift. And there are two other places in the pastoral epistles where similar language is used in reference to Timothy.

1 Timothy 118. This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare.

prayer. And then 2 Timothy 1.6. For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which was given by the laying on of hands.

So is this gift the ministry itself, or is it something that empowers Timothy for ministry, like teaching or confidence in the face of false teachers, or a spiritual gift?

faith? Honestly, I'm not certain. But I lean towards seeing it as the gift in reference to pastoring. The laying on of hands seems to refer to this pastoral affirmation from the Ephesian elders.

[31 : 36] Actually, later in chapter 5, Paul will tell Timothy, don't be hasty in the laying on of hands. And I think what he's saying is, do you see all these examples of teachers who are leading people astray?

Do not be hasty in affirming pastors and teachers. Make sure the character lines up. But also the closest referent is this ministry of teaching in verse 13 that he's supposed to devote himself to.

Now, kind of in verse 15, Paul summarizes all that he's been saying with four active commands and one promise. Practice, immerse, keep watch, persist.

For by so doing, you will save both yourself and your hearers. So point four, persistent effort in ministry. Persistent effort in ministry.

What must Timothy practice? What are these things referring to this time? I don't think this actually refers to the whole letter or even necessarily the substance of the gospel.

[32 : 40] I think this refers to what Paul has just said, this imitation and instruction that comprises the ministry. And notice the connotation of these verbs, what it communicates in it.

He says, practice these things. This isn't like preparing for a play, high schoolers, where you rehearse your line and prep for the main event. He's not telling Timothy to recite his sermons until they sound good on Sunday.

The New American Standard Version says, take pains. I think the idea is something about diligence. This ongoing effort at imitation and instruction. And then a different kind of verb. Immerse yourself in them. Don't just engage with your head. Engage with your heart. Engage with your hands. This whole person giving yourself to imitation and instruction.

What we think, what we love, and what we do must be conformed to Jesus. There's no room for hypocrisy in pastoring.

[33 : 46] And the good news again is that there is actually visible progress. Christians can actually grow. This isn't just an idea.

idea. It's actually the expectation if Timothy gives himself and we give ourselves to making progress in godliness. The third verb is keep watch over yourself and on the teaching.

The verb implies that temptations and distractions will come. It's not a matter of the world and the flesh and sin getting in the way.

It's will we be distracted? Will we drift from Jesus? Persistence. Persistence requires stamina. Ministry is a marathon. It's not a sprint. A lot of young Christians in a good way are very zealous for God.

[34 : 50] They're learning theology and they're learning the scriptures. But when they hit a trial, it's like, where did God go? But the reality is that ministry and the Christian life is a marathon.

It's not a sprint. And every trial, every difficulty is an opportunity to continue in growing in godliness. the sobering reality.

The sobering reality, I think, of verse 16 is that there are two outcomes in ministry. Salvation or shipwreck.

Salvation or shipwreck. I think the quote from Pastor Paul Tripp puts it well. Leadership in the church of Jesus Christ is not a battle for theological faithfulness, or sorry, not just a battle for theological faithfulness, gospel purity, and methodological integrity.

It is also always a war for the heart of every leader. Many more leaders fail because they have lost the battle of their heart than because of shifts in their theology or view of the gospel.

[36 : 02] people. And the sobering reality is that the pastoral epistles are full of examples of people who have lost the battle.

They were likely a part of the group at one point, but they became enamored with something other than Jesus. Genealogies or position or power or money.

And these same dangers can shipwreck our ministry too. The love of money, the love of power, the love of success, pride, suffering, cynicism.

That seems pretty bleak to be honest. So what is our hope? What does ministry depend on? It depends on making progress in godliness.

It depends on keeping our eyes up to Jesus, the one who keeps us. I want to conclude with two words of exhortation.

[37 : 10] There's two ways to think about this text. First, don't pursue arrival. Pursue Jesus. Don't pursue arrival.

Pursue Jesus. If you pursue arrival, goals rather than godliness will become the focus. You'll be so set on making the next thing that you'll miss God in the process.

But the weird thing is that if you pursue Jesus, you will never arrive. You'll be coming to him again and again and again in faith and repentance and worship.

And isn't that the Christian life? It's not arriving. It's pursuing him. When I got out of college, you know, college is this time of an insane amount of information being thrown at you.

And you're working 50, 60 hours on homework. And for me, I was an RA and I had a job and I had a fiance. And it was like, man, when I get out of college, it's going to be great.

[38 : 20] I'm going to have all this time for learning. I'm going to be set. And it doesn't work out that way. There's always more to do. And that's actually a good thing.

It's not a bad thing necessarily. It makes us return to Christ in every moment and say, Lord, how can I please you? What is the priority? Help me to honor you.

Second, create margin for learning so that you can make progress. Learning isn't about getting more busy with books and articles and conferences.

It's actually the opposite. It's the slowing down to reflect and to remember God. Time seems to always be the issue with priorities.

And we all know this kind of in different ways. there's another email. There's another activity. There's more teaching, more training, more conversations, more needs in our families. [39 : 18] And our culture provides, ironically, more ways to multitask efficiently in all these things. But the reality is that it doesn't accelerate godliness. Godliness happens through persistent effort with God over time.

Persistent effort with God over time. And progress requires that. So we don't microwave spirituality. We have to create margin for learning and growing.

Let me conclude with Titus 2, 11 to 14. This kind of sums up really Paul's message. And it's a word of hope for us. He says this, For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, to redeem us from all lawlessness, and to purify for himself a people for his own possession, who are zealous for good works.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, how we need you.

We're so prone to distraction. We're so prone to deviate from Christ, to make something else our goal. Lord, even good things.

[41 : 06] And you know our hearts. We want to please you. So, Lord, I pray that you would recenter us in our progress and godliness. Help us, Lord, to bring all of our responsibilities, all of our cares, and our concerns to you, and ask, Lord, how can we be pleasing to you?

And thank you, Lord, that because of Jesus, we are, in fact, pleasing to you. Lord, because of his righteousness, we are made clean.

So, Lord, help these things to motivate our growth and godliness. Make us godly men and women who love you and love our neighbor with all of our hearts. We ask these things, Lord, only by your Holy Spirit.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.