

September 1, 2024

WHAT MAKES ONE A GOOD SERVANT OF CHRIST?

1 Timothy 4:6-10

*(10 of 15 in a series through 1 Timothy)*

I was watching an interview with an actor a while back, where the topic of conversation was the actor's change in his physique. He'd been a bit on the heavy side of things prior to taking on this role that required him to get in great shape. Therefore, the interviewer was wanting to know how he'd made this transformation. And my curiosity got the best of me as well, so I watched it. After all, I could use a bit of help. The actor answered the question as to how he'd pulled this transformation off by saying that he'd hired multiple people. One person was a cook and nutritionist who'd figured out the exact things he needed to eat every meal and prepared and served those things to him throughout the day. The other person was a trainer who came up with the precise exercises he needed to do each day and helped lead him through them.

Needless to say, after hearing his answer, my response wasn't, "Well, I should probably do that too." It's challenging enough to eat well and exercise, but if it's going to require hiring people to do so, that's just a path I'm unwilling (and unable) to go down.

But what if you had someone who could tell you what you needed to do in order to walk well spiritually? After all, spiritual health is even more important than physical health. So, what if you had someone who could tell you, "If you want to be a good servant of Christ, then here's what you need to do"? Well, that is precisely what we have in the text we're going to look at today in 1 Timothy 4:6-10 as Paul tells Timothy how to be "a good servant of Christ Jesus" (v. 6).

Now, to be fair, Paul doesn't write these verses as a word to all Christians in general. In other words, Paul doesn't write these verses, telling Timothy to share these instructions with the people in Ephesus so that they might know how to walk as good servants of Christ. Rather, he tells Timothy how *he* might be a good servant of Christ Jesus as he seeks to lead and correct things going on at the church in Ephesus. However, as we look at these verses, I think you'll see that the things Paul tells Timothy to do, the Bible tells all believers to do elsewhere, at least in some measure. Therefore, I think that 1 Timothy 4:6-10 can help us see specific instructions that we can follow to ensure that we either continue to be or become a good servant of Christ Jesus. So, what is it that Paul tells Timothy to do to be a good servant of Christ? I'll name four things. First, nourish yourself on God's Word and share it with others.

**Nourish yourself on God's Word and share it with others**

As Paul opens this paragraph, he tells Timothy in verse 6, "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." Let's start with the second half of that. The word there translated "trained" is not the same word that you see translated "train" or "training" in verses 7-8. This is its only occurrence in the Bible, but outside of the Scripture it is used in

contexts where it can mean “trained” but also is used to communicate being “brought up, reared, or nourished.”<sup>1</sup> The idea seems to be, then, that Paul is telling Timothy that the source of his growth and development as a good servant of Christ needs to be the “words of the faith and of the good doctrine [he has] followed” (v. 6). That is, he needs to be feeding on the Scriptures personally.

I know I’ve said this often, but the Bible’s clear and repeated answer to how we walk in persevering obedience and keep from being swayed and led astray by the devil and the hostile culture in which we live is by knowing, believing, and obeying the Bible. So that’s what Paul tells Timothy. Be reared in the Bible, nourished in the Bible, and trained in and by the Bible. Let it remind you of the gospel and teach you sound doctrine.

But then Paul adds, at the beginning of verse 6, that we also hold up the Scripture to others, as Paul tells Timothy, “Put these things before the brothers.” As a church, we need to be a community of people who read the Bible (learning what it says and believing it), listen to the Bible taught and preached, and exhort one another by reminding one another what the Bible says. There’s simply no substitute for that in our lives.

If we do not follow what Paul tells Timothy in verse 6, and we begin to neglect our personal intake of the Bible (reading the Bible and hearing it preached and taught), it will inevitably lead to us believing and practicing sinful things. To think otherwise would be like being onboard a ship, pulling up your anchor in the midst of waters with a strong current, and telling yourself you won’t be moved. You most certainly will. And if we fail to hold up the Bible to one another, we’re failing to do our part in loving our brothers and sisters and aiding them in perseverance as well. So this is where we start if we want to be good servants of Christ. We nourish ourselves on God’s Word consistently and share it with others.

A second point in our text is somewhat simply the other side of the coin with regard to the first point. In our first point, we’re seeing the need to nourish ourselves with truth and hold up truth to others. Second, you must reject all false teaching.

### **Reject all false teaching**

As Paul continues to exhort Timothy, he writes in verse 7, “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths.” Why does Paul bring up irreverent, silly myths? It seems that it’s because that’s how he’s referring to the false teaching that had come up at the church in Ephesus. I say that because back in 1:3-4, Paul reminded Timothy that he’d left him in Ephesus so that he might “charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies.” So, after identifying their false teaching as “myths” in chapter 1, it makes sense to assume that his reference to “irreverent, silly myths” in chapter 4 is a reference to that

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<sup>1</sup> See Philip Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 304; Robert Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 237.

false teaching. Therefore, Paul is telling Timothy not to have anything to do with the false teaching spreading in Ephesus or any other false teaching for that matter.

Obviously by telling Timothy to have nothing to do with it, he doesn't mean that he isn't to call it out and rebuke it. Paul himself has just done that in 4:1-5. What he's telling him is that Timothy doesn't need to be someone who entertains things that obviously stand contrary to the teaching of Scripture. We know this when it comes to sinful practices. If you contemplate and entertain the thought of engaging in a sinful practice, it has the effect ultimately of leading you into that sinful practice. The man who asks himself every day if he'll steal from his employer that day is not setting himself up for a life of morality. He should simply rule things out of bounds, unacceptable, and not to be entertained. Well, as that is true with regard to sinful practices, so it is true in regard to false teaching. We need to see it as unacceptable and not to be entertained.

Putting these two together, we come back to an image that we've seen before, namely, the need to fast and feast. In order to be a good servant of Jesus Christ, we're fasting on the falsehoods that are touted all around us and which stand contrary to the Scripture, and we're feasting on the Scripture itself, feeding our souls with what is true, right, good, and beautiful. So, first, Paul tells Timothy to nourish himself with the truth of Scripture and hold it up before others, and second, he tells him to reject all false teaching. And as we continue, we can add a third. As a good servant of Christ, train yourself to walk in godliness.

### **Train yourself to walk in godliness**

After telling Timothy to have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths, he writes, "Rather, train yourself for godliness" (v. 8). And this idea of training, carries the idea of disciplined exertion. We know that because he compares it to training ourselves physically, like working out, lifting weights, running, etc. He writes, "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" (v. 8).

Starting with that comparison, Paul does tell us that physical exercise is profitable. It profits you in this life. It can help keep you healthy, strong, and fit. And all those things are good. But when you compare it to training yourself spiritually, it's not as profitable because the effects of bodily training don't carry over into eternity. When we're raised from the dead and receive our resurrected bodies, it's not like some of us are going to have stronger, faster glorified bodies because we spent time in the gym during our lives. All of us will have glorious, resurrection bodies—whether you were an exerciser or not in this life. So, physical exercise benefits us, but its benefits are limited to this life and this age.

Spiritual discipline and training, on the other hand, benefits us now, *and* it benefits us in the age to come. The effects of disciplining ourselves to delight in God's Word and love the Lord have eternal, glorious consequences. So, although training yourself bodily is helpful, spiritual training is even better.

So what does that look like? Well, Paul doesn't really elaborate. He doesn't outline a list of disciplines—comparable to exercises at the gym—that you can do to train yourself for godliness. But, seeing that he's revolved what he's been saying around the Word of God and the sound doctrine taught in God's Word, it's quite likely that Paul is picturing us training ourselves in knowing, believing, and obeying God's Word.

And training is the right word here because we may not be in shape for it. We may not have had our appetites trained for it. Let me give you a comparison with eating. For most of my life, I haven't really paid attention to what I ate. I've never been prone to weight gain, and I've been pretty healthy. So what happened a few years ago is that I started eating a good bit of sugar every single day. And it did something to me physiologically. If I didn't have sugar on a day, I'd crave it. I could eat a big meal, feel very full, and then only a few minutes later would feel like I wasn't really full until I had sugar.

Now, I said to myself, "I think this is bad. I need to change." So I decided that I'd quit sugar. Now, I'm not a moderation guy when it comes to sugar. I just have to quit. I can't dabble in it. I appreciate those of you who can eat sugar in moderation. You say things like, "Just have a little bit each week," and I'm like, "Thank you for caring but having no idea who I am." But back to the point. So, I'd stop sugar, but then felt like I was starving. After meals I'd crave sweets. I'd make myself eat something that wasn't sweet, and my body was like, "What is this nonsense? This is terrible. I'm starving."

You see, I'd trained my body to want and feel like it needs this quick hit of pleasure that sugary sweets give it. It's great—for like five minutes. You feel lethargic and terrible afterward, but for that fleeting bit of time, sugar is so pleasurable. I'd trained my body to think that I needed sugar and that healthy foods are terrible. So, I'm trying to retrain myself.

Okay, now let's bring this over to disciplining yourself for godliness. There are some of us who are doing the equivalent of snacking on sugary sweets all the time. We fill ourselves with the little distractions that our phones can give us and have sought out sinful pleasures. And so when you go to sit down and spend some time reading the Bible or praying the Word, everything in your being says, "I need something else." When someone says, "Try to enjoy the pleasure that is found in just communing with the Lord," it feel like saying, "Here, snack on some cauliflower to a sugar addict." You've trained yourselves to crave the fleeting pleasures of sin and the distractions of your phone for so long that you can't even recognize the pleasure that's found in meditating on God's Word and praying over it.

And that means you're unhealthy spiritually (just like I've described being unhealthy physically because I've trained my body to crave what's bad for it and not recognize as satisfying what is actually good for it). So what you need to do is to train yourself for godliness. Now, again, you may be in a very unhealthy place, and so don't expect it to come easy. If you think, "Yes, this week I'll spend one hour every day meditating on Scripture and praying over it," my guess is that you might feel like you're going crazy. That might be comparable to entering the gym and doing every exercise on day one.

Rather, recognizing that you're unhealthy and have untrained appetites, start with maybe ten minutes.<sup>2</sup> Set a timer, and for ten minutes, you're going to read the Word and pray it back to the Lord. So, you read Psalm 23, and you pray, "Father, thank you for being present with me as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Thank you for pursuing me throughout my life with your goodness and mercy." And it may be that your mind and heart are screaming at you, "Pick up your phone" or telling you there's no pleasure in this at all. But don't stop short of your ten minutes. You're training yourself. Then, next week, jump to fifteen minutes.

And you know what will happen? It won't be immediate, but eventually you won't be fighting the entire time to put aside the Bible and do something else. Your prayers won't be interrupted by your constant desire to stop praying and do something. When someone says to you, "Don't pursue the fleeting pleasures of lust or gossip or the like but seek the pleasure of spending time enjoying the Lord," it won't sound foreign to you. It won't sound like someone is saying, "Aren't kale and beets the most enjoyable snacks in the world?"

But it takes training because many of us may be as spiritually unhealthy in these practices as I had gotten myself physically unhealthy with my diet. So practice some fasting and some feasting. Fast from entertaining teaching and those things that pull you away from enjoying the Lord, and feast on his Word and enjoy sitting with him in prayer. Bodily training is good. But this spiritual training for godliness is much better. So let's commit to becoming more spiritually healthy, training our appetites, and pursuing that which brings us the greatest value in this life. That's what a good servant of Christ does.

And let me list one final thing. If you're going to be a good servant of Christ, you must set your hope on our coming salvation.

### **Set your hope on our coming salvation**

This is how Paul ends our section, writing in verses 9-10, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have set our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe." Now, the main point to show here is that all of our training for godliness is worth it because we've set our hope on God to bring us to full salvation on that final day. That is, I trust he's going to bring me to heaven, to raise my body, and to allow me to dwell with him in a glorified new creation forever, and therefore I am willing to discipline and train myself for godliness now, even though it requires striving and toiling. That's the main argument Paul is making, and that's where I want to end.

But I realize that it's hard for us to focus on this point when you may well be caught up in trying to figure out some confusing language that Paul uses when he describes the Lord as "the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe." Therefore, let me try to explain what Paul does

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<sup>2</sup> I got this idea from Timothy O'Day.

and doesn't mean with that phrase, and then we'll return to focus on the main point I think Paul wants us to see.

So, what does Paul mean when he describes the living God as "the Savior of all people, especially those who believe"? Well, we could suggest that he is saying that God is going to grant salvation—forgiveness of sins and eternal life—to every single person who has lived, now lives, and will live on the earth. After all, if our God is the "Savior of all people," then that is a logical conclusion? But here are a couple problems with that view. First, the Bible teaches all over the place that there are the saved and unsaved, the righteous and the wicked, and that the wicked will face eternal damnation. So it can't mean that everyone will be saved, unless we're prepared to dismiss the teaching of the rest of Scripture. Moreover, if we take it that God being the "Savior of all people" means that all people are eternally saved, then Paul's phrase "especially of those who believe" is a pointless phrase. I mean, if everyone saved in the end, what does it mean that one group is *especially* saved. That's like saying everyone in this room gets a million dollars, but twenty of you will especially get the million dollars. It's senseless. And it's senseless because Paul isn't saying that all people will be saved when he says that the Lord is the "Savior of all people."

The only people who will be saved by our Lord are those who believe. That's obviously what Paul is saying when he sets that group apart, writing, "especially of those who believe." So what's he saying in the first part when he calls our God "the Savior of all people"? Here's what I think he's saying. I think he's noting that God is the potential savior of all people, but he's the actual savior only for those who believe.<sup>3</sup> In other words, there is only one savior, and that is our God. If anyone at all is saved, it's only because God saves them through the mediatorial work of his Son, Jesus. He's the only potential savior for anyone. This is the same thing Peter claims when he says in Acts 4:12, "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." But he is the *actual* savior for (and, indeed, he only saves) those who believe. I think that's what Paul is saying in verse 10. Again, our Lord is the potential savior for all people, but he is the actual savior for those who believe.

But now let's get back to his main point. I know that the work of training yourself for godliness, turning away from false teaching, learning the Word, obeying the Word, and holding up the Word for others is hard work. Indeed, Paul uses the words "toil and strive" in verse 10. But remember the end. Our God will save us. That is our sure and certain hope. And so we set our hope on God who is our savior, knowing that he'll bring us to himself. And that makes all our toiling and striving more than worth it. On that day, we'll freely and fully enjoy him forever. And that day is certain because Jesus lived, died, was raised for us, and is coming to get us. So hold fast. Keep toiling and striving. Keep training yourself to know, believe, love, and obey God's Word. On that final day you'll know it was all worth it. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> For a lengthier argument supporting this conclusion, see Thomas Schreiner, "'Problematic Texts' for Definite Atonement in the Pastoral and General Epistles," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 375-97.