

Lesson 5: Faithful Christian Service (1 Timothy 1:18-20)

Dr. Howard Hendricks tells of the time he saw a young reporter interview Bud Wilkinson, who was then the coach of the top-ranked Oklahoma Sooners football team. The reporter enthusiastically bubbled, “Coach Wilkinson, tell us what contribution collegiate football has made toward physical fitness in America.” He was rather stunned when Wilkinson replied, “I do not believe that football has made any contribution to physical fitness in America.” “What do you mean?” asked the dumbfounded reporter. “I define football,” replied Wilkinson, “as 22 men on the field desperately needing rest, and 50,000 people in the stands desperately needing exercise.” Dr. Hendricks concludes by saying, “What a description of the local church!”

Sadly, Christianity in America is often a spectator sport. You go on Sunday and sit and watch while the pros perform. After all, that’s what they’re paid to do, isn’t it? “But me? Well, you see, I’m just a layman.” But as we saw last week, “there ain’t no such animal in the Bible.” In the New Testament, there is no special class of persons called “ministers” or “clergymen” or “priests.” Rather, every believer in Jesus Christ is a minister and priest before God. Every believer is to be a functioning member of the Body of Christ, with a God-given ministry to fulfill.

I emphasize the point because we have been so indoctrinated with the faulty viewpoint of our culture that it’s difficult to shake. I’ll bet that if someone new in the church asked, “Who is your minister?” most of you would reply without a thought, “Steve Cole is our minister.” Do you know what you should reply? You should say, “Which minister did you have in mind? We have about 300 of them here. If you’re asking ‘Who is it we support so that he can devote full-time to teaching the Bible and shepherding the flock?’ the answer is, Steve Cole. But he is only one minister of many in the church.” We need to challenge faulty cultural views and evaluate everything in light of the Scriptures.

Paul had left Timothy in Ephesus to confront some false teachers who were leading people astray through their wrong teaching from the Law. That wasn’t a “fun” assignment, especially for someone of Timothy’s timid disposition, so he was probably tempted to look for a more peaceful situation. Paul urges him to remain on and confront the problems (1:3). As he reminds Timothy of the gospel he is to preach (1:11), Paul is diverted to remind Timothy again of the life-changing power of that gospel as experienced by Paul (1:12-17). In our text (1:18-20), he returns to his task of urging Timothy to “hang in there” in the ministry to which God has called him.

These verses reveal seven principles of ministry that apply to every believer, because every Christian is in the ministry. These are not the only principles you need to know, nor are they even the most basic. But you won’t survive in Christian service and hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” from our Lord without them.

To serve the Lord faithfully, you must understand and follow these principles of ministry:

1. The ministry is a sacred trust to be obeyed.

Paul says (1:18), “This command” It’s the same word used in verses 3 and 5, and refers to the command to promote sound doctrine by confronting the false teachers and their doctrines. It’s a military word that means an order passed through the ranks from superior to subordinate. Paul received

his orders from the Lord; he passes them on to Timothy, who is to relay them to the church. The word conveys a sense of urgent obligation. Donald Guthrie writes, “Timothy is solemnly reminded that the ministry is not a matter to be trifled with, but an order from the commander-in-chief” (*Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, The Pastoral Epistles* [Eerdmans], p. 67).

Paul says that he entrusts this command to Timothy. The word “entrust” is used of entrusting something valuable to someone for safe keeping. It is used of making a deposit in a bank; also of entrusting a loved one to another’s care. “It always implies that a trust has been reposed in someone for which he will be called to account” (William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* [Westminster Press], p. 51).

The lesson for us is this: The ministry is not an optional choice for the more dedicated. God doesn’t call for volunteers. The ministry is a sacred trust from God to each individual which each person must obey and for which that person must give an account. If God has called you to Himself, then He has called you to serve. His particular orders to you as to how and where He wants you to serve must be seen as a sacred deposit entrusted to you by the commander-in-chief. You’re under orders. And you do your ministry to please Him, not for strokes from others or for self-gratification.

2. The ministry is people building into the lives of people who build into the lives of people.

We can see this principle more specifically in [2 Timothy 2:2](#), where Paul used this same word, “entrust.” The principle is, Paul entrusted certain things to Timothy; Timothy was to entrust them to others; and the others were to entrust them to others. It’s a process of multiplication, where a more mature Christian imparts life in Christ to one who is younger in the faith so that person can grow to maturity to repeat the process. In [1 Timothy 1:18](#) we see Paul involved in the process with Timothy, whom he affectionately calls, “my son” (lit., “child”). The word shows that ministry is always in the context of warm personal relationships.

What often happens in the local church is that ministry becomes institutionalized instead of being personalized. In other words, “having a ministry” comes to mean, “I serve on the board of elders,” or on the budget committee, or “I teach Sunday School.” All these are important ministries, of course. I’m not belittling them. But it’s possible to keep the institution rolling along, but to miss the heart of ministry, which is building into the lives of people. I read of a new Christian who was leading a number of his friends to Christ and seeing them begin to grow in Christ. But the people in his church were encouraging him to become one of the sponsors of the high school youth group so that he could have a ministry!

The reason ministry tends to become institutionalized is that we’re threatened by people. We’re afraid to open up and share our lives. We’re afraid to have others be honest with us. It’s so much more comfortable just to keep the institution functioning. But the ministry is not an institution. It’s people. I define ministry as a person being full of Jesus Christ and slopping over to build others through open, caring relationships.

3. The ministry is in accordance with spiritual gifts.

The phrase “in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you” probably should be connected with [1 Timothy 4:14](#), “Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery.” This probably refers to God’s confirmation of Timothy’s spiritual gifts through the elders in the church. If this is the sense, it

means that Timothy was ministering at Ephesus because of his divinely indicated spiritual gifts, confirmed through these church leaders.

While not everyone's ministry is so dramatically indicated (I think Timothy was an exception), the principle still holds true that ministry should be in accordance with the spiritual gifts God has given you. God has given each one of us spiritual gifts which equip us for unique ministries in the Body of Christ. You can do things that I can't do as well, because I don't have your gifts and personality. When you minister in the area of your gifts, it is usually a source of joy to serve, because you're doing what God has equipped you to do. (I said *usually*! I'll say more on that in a moment.)

Two cautions are in order at this point: (1) Don't sit around waiting for some special revelation of your gift. Some Christians study the lists of spiritual gifts and pray that God will reveal their gift to them. But they never get involved in serving. Their excuse is that they don't know their gift.

That's a fallacy. Gifts are always revealed in the context of serving. Timothy was already serving the Lord in Lystra when Paul returned to town, Timothy's gifts were recognized, and he was asked to join Paul in ministry. Paul himself, as soon as he was saved, began preaching Christ in Damascus. He went into Arabia for some special training and returned to Damascus, still preaching. He went to Jerusalem and kept preaching. He went to his home region in Tarsus, where there is good evidence that he continued preaching. Barnabas tracked him down and took him to Antioch, where they taught the church for a considerable time. In that context God called him to go out on his first missionary journey. Spiritual gifts are revealed and recognized in the context of serving. So get involved in building people in Jesus Christ, and your gifts will become obvious.

The second caution: (2) Don't neglect serving in certain capacities because they aren't your gift. We're all commanded to do almost every one of the tasks for which there are spiritual gifts. Some people cop out of their responsibilities by saying, "I don't have the gift of evangelism, so I don't have to witness for Christ." Or, "I don't have the gift of helps, so I can't get involved in setting up chairs and tables." That's ridiculous!

As your gift emerges, it should define your primary focus for ministry. But it should not exclude you from tasks that may be unpleasant to your personality. Timothy was a timid soul, and yet Paul is exhorting him to hang in there and confront those false teachers. Being gifted doesn't mean that the Christian ministry is all fun!

4. The ministry is a long fight, not a short picnic.

Paul doesn't say, "Play the good Sunday School picnic," but "fight the good fight." The ministry is spiritual warfare. The word fight signifies a campaign rather than a single battle. To change the metaphor it is a marathon race, not a hundred yard dash. And the enemy is trying to trip you up and get you to drop out.

To serve the Lord faithfully, you've got to realize that you're in for the long haul and it isn't going to be easy. Some people get all excited about ministry, but they burn out. Others get excited until problems hit, and then they quit. Others bail out when they catch criticism (which you will!). Others expect instant results; when it doesn't happen, they get discouraged and quit. Others are so excited about ministry, they don't get any training, and they run dry after a while. All of these problems could be solved if people would realize that the ministry to which God has called each one of us is a lifetime campaign

against a powerful enemy. Note that Timothy's fight was against men who were in the church. That's usually where the battle is waged.

5. The ministry is more dependent on personal integrity than on polished technique.

Paul exhorts Timothy to keep "faith and a good conscience." "Faith" is probably a broad reference both to doctrine and to belief. Timothy is to hold to his trust in the truth of the gospel. And he is to walk uprightly. He is not to violate his conscience, which is to be shaped by the Word of God. Belief and behavior always go together. In the case of the false teachers, they had abandoned (the word means "to push away") their good conscience, resulting in the subsequent shipwreck of their faith. Quite often, doctrinal errors are the result of moral problems rather than intellectual problems. Men who teach false doctrine often do so to avoid the moral implications of God's truth in their own lives.

The basis for having a ministry in the lives of others is to have a personal trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word and to walk in obedience to Him: "faith and a good conscience." We live in a day that has gone crazy over methods. Hardly a week goes by without my receiving a flyer promising me proven techniques to increase attendance in this church. While there may be some helpful methods, I tend to avoid such techniques like the plague. The best method for any ministry is to hold on to faith and a good conscience. If you have reality with God, He will use you in fruitful ministry in the lives of others. If you do not, methods will avail you nothing, and you will suffer shipwreck in the faith.

6. The ministry has casualties.

Some shipwreck their faith. To use the earlier analogy, some go down in battle. That fact is not news to anyone who has been around for a while, but it is important to remember. We all have a tendency to put our eyes on certain church leaders instead of on Christ Himself. Satan can't cause Christ to fall, but he can work on leaders who have a lot of people looking to them for growth. If such a person falls, there are usually a lot of others who fall as well. We need to develop the attitude that says, "Even if _____ (whoever you admire spiritually) falls away from the faith, I'm going to keep serving the Lord Jesus."

Another reason it's important to remember that there are casualties in the ministry is to constantly warn yourself of the danger from the enemy. If Satan can lull you into thinking that the Christian life and ministry to which you have been called is a Sunday School picnic instead of a war, then you'll let your defenses down and he can get to you. I hear often, as you do, of men who have had effective ministries for a number of years, who have fallen into the sin of adultery. That scares me! It makes me confront the sin in my heart and be alert to spiritual danger. Satan shoots real bullets! Watch out or you'll get hit!

7. The ministry involves unpleasant tasks at times.

Paul mentions two examples by name, Hymenaeus and Alexander. Hymenaeus is probably the same man mentioned in [2 Timothy 2:17](#); Alexander may be the same as the man mentioned in [2 Timothy 4:14](#). At any rate, these men were apparently church leaders who were involved in some sort of sin (violation of conscience) as well as doctrinal errors. Paul had "delivered them over to Satan." What does he mean?

Paul uses the same expression when dealing with the Corinthian man who was openly committing adultery with his father's wife ([1 Cor. 5:5](#)). Paul viewed the world as Satan's domain. To be in the church, under the authority of the elders, provides a person with a certain amount of protection from the devil

and his attacks through the world. What Paul probably means is that these two men were delivered over to Satan's domain, the world, by being excommunicated from the protective covering of the church and from the fellowship of its members.

Beyond this, there may be the further idea that those in the church were to pray for some bodily ailment to come upon these men to humble them, so that they might repent and be restored to fellowship. The Lord sometimes must strike a person with some severe physical problem to cause the person to turn to Him. The goal of any discipline is to restore, not to punish. Paul's desire was not to get rid of these men, but to see them "taught not to blaspheme."

Sometimes ministering to people involves the unpleasant task of confrontation. On rare occasions, it may have to go before the church and result in formal excommunication, with the prayer and aim of restoration. That is never pleasant, especially for leaders with timid personalities, like Timothy. But it must be done if people are going to grow in Christ and if the body of Christ is going to reflect His holiness and love.

Conclusion

The ministry is not easy. But every person who knows Christ as Savior is called to serve. Knowing and following these seven principles of ministry will help you to be a faithful servant of Jesus Christ:

1. The ministry is a sacred trust to be obeyed.
2. The ministry is people building into the lives of people who build into the lives of people.
3. The ministry is in accordance with spiritual gifts.
4. The ministry is a long fight, not a short picnic.
5. The ministry is more dependent on personal integrity than on polished technique.
6. The ministry has casualties.
7. The ministry involves unpleasant tasks at times.

A little boy went to his first day at first grade. When the clock hands reached 12 noon, he got ready to go home as he was used to doing in kindergarten. The teacher decided to take a positive approach, so she said to him, "In kindergarten you only got to stay here 'til noon, but this year you get to stay all day!"

He looked at her with shock on his face and blurted out, "Who signed me up for this, anyway?"

Timothy probably felt like that as he faced the task of confronting the false teachers in Ephesus. That's how you will often feel in ministry! "Who signed me up for this, anyway?" The Lord did! He's the commander-in-chief; we are drafted to serve faithfully in His army.

A pastor had a son who felt God's calling to follow in his dad's footsteps. When the pastor heard it, he said to his son, "Keep close to God, keep close to men, and bring the two together." Wise counsel for faithful Christian service!

If you're not involved in serving the Lord--remember, I'm defining service as being full of Christ and out of your fulness seeking to build others--if you're not doing that, I'd ask you to evaluate whether you are

walking closely with Christ. You can't give out what you don't possess. The Lord always calls us to be with Him before He sends us out to serve Him ([Mark 3:14](#)). The other area you need to evaluate is, are you too self-focused? If you're so busy doing your own thing that you don't have time to serve the Lord, you're too self-focused. If you're focused on yourself, you won't be looking for opportunities to minister to others.

I heard of a successful Southern California doctor who met Jesus Christ and left his lucrative practice to serve in a primitive country. His non-Christian partner couldn't believe that he would do this. On one of his trips around the world, the unbelieving doctor stopped in to see his former partner.

The Christian doctor was performing surgery on a poor woman in extremely primitive conditions. The non-Christian doctor said, "Don't you remember how much you would have made doing this surgery in Southern California?" "Yes," replied the Christian, "many thousands." "Then why are you doing it?"

"Several reasons. See her clenched fist? In it there are a few coins she will give to our mission. See those kids over there? They will be forever grateful if I can save their mother's life. But there's one more thing - I hope to hear from my Lord someday the words, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'"

God may not direct you to go to a foreign country. But He does want each of us to live in reality with Him and then to get involved in the lives of others in this church and with those who do not yet know Christ, with the goal of seeing every person know Christ as you do and grow to maturity in Christ as you're growing. That's your job as His minister.

Discussion Questions

1. Does the thought of your being "in the ministry" scare you? How would your life be different if you saw yourself that way?
2. So many today talk about "burn out" in ministry. Why do you think this is so? Is burn out avoidable?
3. How important is it to know your spiritual gift? How can a person know it? What difference does it make?
4. What is the most difficult thing for you in serving the Lord? How do you deal with it?