


1 TIMOTHY 4:6

A GOOD SERVANT OF CHRIST JESUS

“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.”¹

odliness looms large in the thinking of the Apostle. The term “godliness” occurs fifteen times in the English Standard Version of the New Testament. The term appears disproportionately in these Pastoral Letters of First Timothy, Second Timothy and Titus, occurring eleven times; and the word is employed nine times here in this First Letter to Timothy. Since these missives sent to Timothy are among the last correspondence of the aged Apostle, the concept of godliness is charged with exaggerated urgency.

If you have followed the Apostle’s argument to this point, you will know that godliness cannot be restricted to a Sunday morning, eleven-to-twelve concept; godliness is dynamic, growing out of knowledge of the True and Living God. Like Isaiah when he was confronted by the glory of the Living God, the Christian falls on her face and cries out, “Here I am! Send me” [see **ISAIAH 6:8**]! Awe—then action!

Perhaps that accounts for the lack of emphasis on godliness in contemporary preaching. Seemingly few of us who occupy the sacred desk know what it is to have been awestruck at the knowledge of the Holy One. Consequently, too often we modern preachers are unprepared to speak either of His glory or of the need for those listening to strive for holiness. Because the pulpit is silent on this spiritual necessity, a complacent pew is unwilling to tolerate calls for godliness, believing that religion will suffice to satisfy God.

Whenever I consider such failure by the contemporary pulpit, I am reminded of the divine censure delivered against supposed prophets through the Weeping Prophet, Jeremiah.

“If they had stood in my council,
then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,
and they would have turned them from their evil way,
and from the evil of their deeds.”

[**JEREMIAH 23:22**]

Godliness as presented by the Apostle must not be confused with piety—upturned eyes and folded hands; godliness cannot be cloistered. Godly people are those who reverently worship the True and Living God, with obedience flowing out of that worship throughout the days that follow. Godliness is equated with ongoing obedience. Only those individuals who have known the Holy One can be godly; only those who know what it is to be awestruck can be godly.

Only shortly before this Paul had written of “the Mystery of Godliness.” The mystery of godliness is rooted in Christ Jesus the Lord; Jesus was not only the epitome of godliness—because He is very God, living a sinless life among sinful people and walking in godliness at all times—He is godly. Now, as the ascended Lord of Glory, He gives godliness to His people. Jesus, the Risen Lord of Glory, strikes us with awe and then empowers His people to live in obedience to His will.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The Apostle has been scathing about those who focus on the externals of life as though they could be a means to godliness. He says that all such efforts to substitute aestheticism for godliness amounts to the “teachings of demons” [1 TIMOTHY 4:1] and he identifies those who promote such errant teaching as “insincere[] liars whose consciences are seared” [1 TIMOTHY 4:2]. Understand that while it is evil to promote that which God has created as though it is the summum bonum of life, it is equally wicked for anyone to teach that God’s good creation is to be rejected in order to be godly. To permit deviant teaching such as this to go unchallenged is tantamount to denying the finished and glorious work of Christ our Master!

Thus, Paul has focused on how Timothy is to prepare the congregation of the righteous to live and work in the midst of a fallen society. Because he provides this instruction for Timothy, we benefit as well. We also live in this fallen world and in a broken society. Technologically advanced, we moderns appear incapable of ruling our emotions. Trained from childhood that each of us is special, we are intolerant of anything than challenges our personal comfort. Focused on gratifying our own insatiable desires, we are always unsatisfied and hungering for something more. Christians are to be different, focused on honouring the Lord Christ and serving one another in a spirit of harmony and peace.

THE ELDERS’ TASK — “Put these things before the brothers.” Let’s establish a truth that is neglected far too often in contemporary church life—elders are responsible to preach and teach. When the first deacons were appointed by the congregation in Jerusalem, the Apostles established the principle of a division of labour among the churches. They prefaced the charge to the congregation by saying, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables” [ACTS 6:2]. They followed this by establishing their priority when they said, “We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” [ACTS 6:4].

Clearly, they Apostles, and apparently the entirety of the congregation as well, were convinced that the primary work assigned those providing oversight of the congregation was to commit themselves to prayer and to preaching. Could we ask those first believers to define the primary task of overseers, they would undoubtedly inform us that the overseers were responsible to preach and to pray. These early believers would have insisted that this work was an awesome responsibility and that if the elders failed on this count, the entire church would suffer.

Throughout the Pastoral Letters, Paul emphasises the importance of preaching the Word. Here are a few instances to establish the importance of this task. “An overseer must be ... able to teach” [1 TIMOTHY 3:2]. In his later letter to this same young pastor, Paul would remind him, “The Lord’s servant must [be] able to teach” [2 TIMOTHY 2:24]. The work of communicating biblical truth to the congregation is so important that the Apostle would instruct Timothy to seek out and equip other men who would be able to continue this ministry of teaching. “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” [2 TIMOTHY 2:2].

One final instance of the apostolic emphasis on the necessity of preaching and teaching is the Apostle’s final charge to Timothy. “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” [2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5].

Paul's final word to the elders of the Ephesian congregation when he met them at Miletus is provided in Doctor Luke's account of the early church. "I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" [ACTS 20:26, 27]. Those powerful words should serve as the template for the preaching even to this day late in the Church Age. Those who occupy the sacred desk must assess their message to ensure that they do not "shrink from declaring ... the whole counsel of God." The preacher is responsible to ensure that the message delivered fulfils the mandate of the Risen Lord who appoints to this ministry of heralding the mind of the Master.

This is a reminder that the task assigned elders is not merely delivering sermons—elders are responsible to declare the mind of Christ to those who listen. They must instruct all who hear to ensure that those listening know the will of God and receive encouragement to fulfil the will of God. In doing this, the pastor will comfort the broken-hearted, encourage the discouraged, strengthen the weak, provide healing to the wounded, build what has been broken down and honour the One to Whom the flock belongs.

The pastor is to "teach what accords with sound doctrine" [TITUS 2:1]. He is to "hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" [TITUS 1:9]. Obviously, whether the listener feels good about herself or himself is immaterial. What is vital is that those listening witness the glory of God revealed through the Word that is declared and that they are delivered from the snare of the devil. "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will" [2 TIMOTHY 2:24-26].

The ideal outcome of the message delivered by the elders is declared by the Apostle in the Letter to the Roman Christians. Paul has written, "Thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness" [ROMANS 6:17, 18]. The goal of the preaching and the teaching presented before the congregation is the transformation of lives as people are born from above and into the Kingdom of Heaven, and as those who are redeemed are transformed into the image of God's own Son! The creation of men and women committed to lives described as righteous is the goal of all preaching. In doing this, we glorify God and equip those listening for Heaven itself.

Among contemporary churches, the ability to fulfill administrative duties is obviously esteemed by those "hiring" pastors. The ability to preach and teach is of secondary importance to contemporary pastoral responsibilities, if the quality of preaching in far too many evangelical churches is any indication. This attitude appears to grow out of the view that a church hires the pastor in order to set the congregation free of all responsibility for ministry. Consequently, the service of the church has degenerated into a spectator sport in which a group of people come together to watch a performance on some scheduled basis. The service includes comfortable seating, a musical performance that is evaluated by how much those watching may be moved and a brief, if forgettable, sermon on some religious theme. The following day the preacher can return to his (or her in a growing number of cases) administrative duties and the congregation can get back to doing whatever they wish to do. Pastors are hired to free the "laity" of responsibility for godliness or for ministering to one another. It seems fair to say that worship is viewed as a duty to be fulfilled and which the preacher is paid to perform and direct. However, such concepts are foreign to the New Testament.

When Paul writes of “these things” in our text, it is obvious that he is referring to the whole of what has been addressed to this point in the letter. It is conceivable that he is restricting his thought to the false asceticism and the stewardship expected of Christians for God’s creation, but his focus appears to be broader than just the immediate context. The construction of the Greek in this opening clause is meant to be encouragement to the minister of Christ to gently, repetitively present the things that have preceded. Therefore, we need to recall what has gone before and to this point in the letter.

Paul has cautioned Timothy to expose false teachers, warning those who begin to teach error to cease and desist [see **1 TIMOTHY 1:3-11**]. This task is fulfilled through labouring to ensure a balanced presentation of the Word of God. When necessary, the man of God will be compelled to address directly those who are disseminating error. The preacher will be required to expose sin, warning the sinful of the consequences of unrighteous choices.

The elder who will honour God will be required to exalt Christ the Lord, refusing to take credit for any work performed in the flesh even while pointing to the finished work of the Master [see **1 TIMOTHY 1:12-20**]. On occasion, it will be necessary to hand over to Satan obstreperous individuals who refuse to heed the message of life and who are making shipwreck of the faith of others. The overseer will realise that his ministry at this point is spiritual warfare, requiring him to be energised by the Spirit of God and guided into truth as only the Spirit can do.

The pastor will need to encourage prayer and himself be engaged in prayer for all people, if he will please God [see **1 TIMOTHY 2:1-7**]. As he encourages prayer, he will remind those who listen that he is pointing them to the only True God, Jesus Christ, who is the One Mediator between God and man.

He will be required to stand against the spirit of the age that is prepared to jettison divine institutions for what feels good immediately. In this modern age, it means that the man of God will be compelled to stand against the push to transform the churches through changing the requirements for pastoral oversight through appointing women to fulfil the ministry of God. He will need to instruct men in righteousness in order to establish them in the Faith and to encourage them to stand firm against the spirit of this dying age [see **1 TIMOTHY 2:8-15**].

The minister of Christ will seek out those men whom God is raising up to serve as elders, and he will guide the congregation in seeking out those gifted individuals who will serve as ministers of mercy [see **1 TIMOTHY 3:1-13**].

The man who will faithfully occupy the sacred desk will labour to ensure that he faithfully reveals the mysteries of God, focusing especially on the mystery of godliness—Christ the Lord [**1 TIMOTHY 3:14-16**]. His message will always focus on unveiling what is pleasing to the Lord, boldly declaring these particular truths so that the people will both know the will of the Lord and so they will be encouraged to fulfil the will of the Lord.

The faithful minister of Christ will be aware of the progress of the age, relating how the deviation of religious people from the straightedge of the Faith sets the stage for what is shortly coming to pass [see **1 TIMOTHY 4:1-5**]. The elder who pleases God who appoints to this divine service will be conversant with eschatology—the doctrine of last things; and the minister of the Lord will outline the appropriate response of the people of God to those currents. He will not allow the assembly of the faithful to live in fear, but rather he will point them to the return of the Son of God. He will not permit the people to despair of deliverance, but rather he will remind them of the teaching of the Word. He will instruct them that whether waiting a long time or waiting for a short while, we are to be godly and righteous in our conduct and in our thoughts.

THE ELDERS' TRAINER — "If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus." Let me read the opening words of the text from a somewhat more literal translation: "By pointing out such things to the brothers and sisters..."² The need for repetition in presenting the truths of the Faith is stressed by Paul's use of the present tense. His emphasis implies that this continual presentation of biblical truth was a hallmark of His service. It implies that he relied on gentle persuasion rather than blunt command. Similarly, Timothy was being urged to make it a mark of his ministry always to present truth carefully in such a fashion that it would persuade those who seek to honour God.

Such instruction is common in the letters from Paul's pen. Think with me of a few examples. "I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" [**ROMANS 15:14-16**].

Another instance of the Apostle's gentle persuasion is to be found in an assertion made in **1 CORINTHIANS 4:14**. "I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children." He not only had outlined the behaviour that dishonoured the Lord, but he willingly reminds them of what behaviour should mark their lives.

In his Letter to Colossian Christians, Paul spoke of his method of gentle persuasion on at least two occasions. In **COLOSSIANS 1:24-29**, he writes: "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."

One final example will suffice. Only a few brief sentences after the foregoing was written, Paul wrote, "As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

"See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ" [**COLOSSIANS 2:6-8**].

In each of these instances, as is also apparent in our text, the Apostle warns of error without giving an exhaustive explanation of what those errors might be. Rather, you will note in each of these instances he focused on how truth could serve to build up those to whom he was writing. He was far more concerned that they understood the positive aspects of the Faith than living in abject fear of error. If the foundation was strong, those standing there would be well equipped to handle error when it came.

It is impossible to detail every error that parades under the guise of the Faith. Distortions arise on a daily basis, many of which are ancient errors that were dealt with long centuries past, and new efforts to twist Scripture to suit the pervaded passion of wicked people arise with dismaying frequency. I am not a prophet, but I can say without equivocation that such Scripture twisting will continue until the day our Lord returns.

² The NET Bible First Edition (Biblical Studies Press 2006)

The divine Trainer is Christ the Lord. He is working in the life of the elder who seeks Him and who endeavours to declare faithfully His Word so that His holy people will be equipped to resist wickedness and to walk worthy of the Name by which they are called. This comports with what is written in the Ephesian Encyclical. “He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” [EPHESIANS 4:11-16].

If the man of God will accept the Trainer’s working in his life, he will be challenged as he is pushed to excel. Much of what passes as preaching today is unworthy of the Name of Christ. The failure to think biblically has cost the churches dearly. Because the shepherds have failed to serve as watchmen, the congregations must be characterised as weak and confused in great measure. Charismatic confusion marks much of Christendom as believers focus on gratification of their own desires rather than endeavouring to build one another, to encourage one another or to comfort one another [cf. 1 CORINTHIANS 14:1-4].

Preaching that has no conviction, dilute doctrine, wobbly theology and mere platitudes mark much of what passes as preaching. The pulpit has become a place to psychoanalyse our sinful proclivities, to report on economic policies better described as raw socialism, to confirm pitiful sinners in their fallen condition and to affirm lazy saints in their mediocrity. Tragically, even occult and psychic influence has infiltrated the pulpits in many instances; and assuredly rank infidelity parades as religious fervour. Tragic as these situations are, the greater tragedy is that the professed people of God are incapable of recognising the peril in which they now stand!

We have witnessed enough excuses for preachers who fail to declare God’s Word fully. Don’t excuse apathy, mendacity and spiritual languor by telling me that a preacher somehow compensates for permitting error to reign among the people of God because you imagine he has “a pastor’s heart.” John MacArthur correctly notes that “A pastor’s heart ... is not measured by how good a man is at petting sheep, but by how well he protects them from wolves and feeds them so they grow to be mature and strong.”³ The shepherd is appointed to warn the people, not affirm them in their error or in their senescence.

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul” [EZEKIEL 3:17-21].

³ John F. MacArthur, Jr., MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Timothy (Moody Press, Chicago, IL 1995) 159

As kindly as I know how, I must caution that the pulpit is no place for a man to develop convictions. The preacher is to be trained by the Spirit of God before mounting to the sacred desk; he is to hold convictions and boldly declare those convictions, just as the Apostle has said. “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” [2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5].

The man of God must always keep in mind that he serves Christ the Lord, and not man. Personnel committees and self-important church members who imagine they “run the church” will oppose the man of God, demanding that he acknowledge them for their importance. The servant of God must stand firm, as did Polycarp when was compelled to give a defence of his faith. Polycarp, the Overseer of Smyrna, was put to death in 155 A.D. We have an account of his witness in that final day; it is as moving now as when it was first written.

“Now when Polycarp entered into the arena there came a voice from heaven: ‘Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man.’ And no one saw the speaker, but our friends who were there heard the voice. And next he was brought forward, and there was a great uproar of those who heard that Polycarp had been arrested. Therefore when he was brought forward the Pro-Consul asked him if he were Polycarp, and when he admitted it he tried to persuade him to deny, saying: ‘Respect your age,’ and so forth, as they are accustomed to say: ‘Swear by the genius of Caesar, repent, say: “Away with the Atheists”’; but Polycarp, with a stern countenance looked on all the crowd of lawless heathen in the arena, and waving his hand at them, he groaned and looked up to heaven and said: ‘Away with the Atheists.’ But when the Pro-Consul pressed him and said: ‘Take the oath and I let you go, revile Christ,’ Polycarp said; ‘For eighty and six years have I been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?’”⁴

Assuredly, one can hear echoes of the Apostle Paul in Polycarp’s statement. “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” [2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8].

In such confession, both Polycarp and Paul adopted as their model the Master Himself. Looking back to Jesus before Pilate, Paul urged Timothy to press on in the Faith as he wrote, “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen” [1 TIMOTHY 6:12-16]. Amen, indeed!

⁴ Pope Clement I et. al., **The Apostolic Fathers: volume 2, The Loeb Classical Library** (Macmillan, London, New York, Heinemann 1912-13_ 323-5

THE ELDERS' TRAINING — “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.” Quite literally, Paul encourages Timothy to be [nourishing himself] “in the words of the Faith and of the good doctrine that he has followed.” In short, Timothy is called to feast on the Word of God. He is to dine on the Word as did Jeremiah.

“Your words were found, and I ate them,
and your words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart,
for I am called by your name,
O LORD, God of hosts.”

[JEREMIAH 15:16]

Though feasting on the Word will be sweet to the taste, if the experience of the Revelator [REVELATION 10:9, 10] or that of Ezekiel [EZEKIEL 3:1, 3] is any indication, dining on the Word will be bitter when that Word compels the man of God to speak prophetically. Nevertheless, consistently dining on God's Word will ensure that the man of God will be a good servant of Christ Jesus. Failure to dine on the Word must of necessity lead to poor service to the Master.

Feasting on what is healthy requires the servant of Christ to eschew spiritual junk food. Much of what parades as preaching delivered by the contemporary pulpit is spiritual junk food. And no wonder! The practise of feasting on the Word as a spiritual discipline has fallen out of favour in this day. Too many preachers view the Bible as a source book for a text rather than the divine Word of God given to nourish the soul and to make the believer strong in Christ the Lord. Timothy was to cultivate the spiritual discipline of reading the Word, not to find a sermon, but to nourish his own soul. Woe to the preacher who reads the sacred Word and fails to hear the clarion voice of the Risen Saviour calling the child of God to pursue hard after righteousness. Godliness is impossible in the minister of Christ who fails to hear the voice of the Son of God speaking through the Word. If the pulpit is not godly, how will the flock be encouraged to pursue godliness?

I am speaking from a position of personal experience when I say there is nothing wrong with reading current literature; however, there is something dreadfully wrong when the Word is neglected in order to read current literature. There is nothing wrong with being conversant with the theological controversies of the day; there is something dreadfully wrong with there is insufficient familiarity with the Word to recognise error parading under the guise of scholarship. I am not at all adverse to using quotes from other literature to emphasise a point or to affirm a position. However, I strive to ensure that I bring my listeners back to the Word repeatedly. I make every effort to demonstrate how a particular point is tied to the entirety of what has been delivered to us through the Word of God.

Though the man of God must not hesitate to expose errant teaching, he is not to invest all his time attacking error. There is a time for that, but usually such times are when the Faith can be said to be “in extremis.” The more common approach is through providing that which is healthy and nourishing. Sound doctrine creates strong saints who are unswayed by the emotion of the moment. Rotten doctrine ensures rotten religion that saps strength and enervates the Faith. Paul will warn Timothy, “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths” [1 TIMOTHY 4:7]. Dining on garbage—junk theology and the specious speculations of dying men—assures that one will shortly develop dyspepsia at the least and at the worst expose himself to spiritual septicemia.

John Stott, quoting Cyril Garbett, Bishop of Southwark (1919-1932), states that he remarked privately to a friend, “I can always tell when the clergy have given up any serious attempt to read or think; it becomes obvious at about the age of forty-five. If a man is an Anglo-Catholic, he becomes a bigot; if he is an Evangelical, he becomes a sentimentalist.”⁵ I do not suggest that we should judge a preacher on the basis of a single sermon, anyone can have a bad day; I do say that the full account of the pulpit ministry reveals what an individual is or is not. If biblical preaching is necessary to produce godliness, then there is an awesome responsibility placed upon the minister of God.

It is the responsibility of the assembly to hold the man of God accountable for study and for the messages delivered. The congregation is responsible to ensure that the minister of Christ invests time in study of the Word. The minister’s study must be sacrosanct. I do not say that he should never interact with the parishioners, for that would show a lack of regard for the flock of God. I do say that the congregation should expect that he will labour in the Word, studying as set out in these Pastoral Letters. Paul urges Timothy, “Make every effort to present yourself before God as a proven worker who does not need to be ashamed, teaching the message of truth accurately” [2 TIMOTHY 2:15].⁶

The minister of God should be humbled at the thought of those who preceded him in the Faith. In illustration of the burning desire to know the Word, I refer to the only known writing in the hand of William Tyndale. The note was written sometime in the winter of 1535 as he was incarcerated in Vilvoorde Castle. He wrote the very Marquis of Bergen to whom the Lord Chancellor Thomas Cromwell had already appealed on Tyndale’s behalf. The note, written in Latin, requests a warmer cap, a warmer coat, a piece of cloth to patch his leggings and a woolen shirt. Then, the condemned man pleads, “But above all, I entreat and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the Procurer that he may kindly permit me to have my Hebrew Bible, Hebrew Grammar, and Hebrew Dictionary, that I may spend my time with that study.”⁷

Does the minister of Christ believe the Bible to be the very Word of God? Then he dare not neglect study of the Word. Is he convinced of the veracity of Paul’s contention that, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” [2 TIMOTHY 3:16, 17]? Then, the servant of God must know and understand all that God has said. There is no premium on spiritual ignorance. Moreover, the care of souls demands that he accept the terrifying responsibility that accompanies the position of undershepherd of the flock. It must be understood that the minister of God cannot give out what he has not taken in. Therefore, the elder must spend his time in the Word that the people be built up in this most holy Faith and so that they will move steadily toward godliness.

Timothy is to feed continually on “the words of the Faith” and on “the good doctrine.” Pastors, and through them parishioners, are to feast on the teaching “that accords with godliness” [1 TIMOTHY 6:3]. This is not something new to Timothy, for Paul says that he had followed this at some point in the past, and through use of the perfect tense he indicates that he is still following “the words of the Faith” and “the good doctrine.” Timothy had taken to heart what Paul had taught; now he was encouraged to continue pursuing godliness as Paul had taught.

⁵ John R. W. Stott, **Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1982) 208

⁶ **NET Bible**, op. cit.

⁷ Christian History Magazine, Issue 16: William Tyndale: Early Reformer & Bible Translator (Christian History Institute, Worcester, PA 1987)

Pastors are responsible to be godly men. No less are the people of God called to godliness. Godliness is impossible, however, if one doesn't know God. Surely, the elders are responsible to present the offer of life through faith in the Risen Son of God; and they are charged to present the claims of Christ on the lives of His people. How terrible the charge God levelled against His people when He spoke through Ezekiel! "Say to the rebellious house, to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: O house of Israel, enough of all your abominations, in admitting foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, to be in my sanctuary, profaning my temple, when you offer to me my food, the fat and the blood. You have broken my covenant, in addition to all your abominations. And you have not kept charge of my holy things, but you have set others to keep my charge for you in my sanctuary" [EZEKIEL 44:6-9].

The only thing that could be more terrifying is the dismissal of the lost when they must one day stand before the Son of God. Despite many claiming to be religious, they shall hear, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" [MATTHEW 25:41]. Though these religious individuals will protest, many listening to my voice even now, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name" [MATTHEW 7:22], yet they will be banished as the Judge asserts, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" [MATTHEW 7:23].

It need not be so. God does not call us to be religious; He does not call us to be pious. God calls us to life through faith in Him; and when we are alive in Him, He calls us to be godly. Life in the Son of God is not earned; it is given through the finished work of Christ the Lord. Jesus gave His life as a sacrifice because of your sin. He was buried and then conquered death by rising from the tomb. Now, the offer of God is extended to all who will receive that free gift. If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is my Master," believing with your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be set free. It is with the heart that one believes and is made right with the Father, and it is with the mouth that one openly agrees with God and is set free. Supporting this offer is the unqualified promise of God extended through the Prophet Joel. "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved" [ROMANS 10:13]. There is no question but that God now offers life—a new quality of life—to each individual who accepts His Son as Master. I pray that includes you.

And for all who name the Name of Christ the Lord, know that God calls you to godliness. Know that there is no excuse for doctrinal drift, for flirting with error, for turning aside from feasting on the Word to dig through the garbage bins of man's best thoughts. Determine that you will both support and demand a rigorous pulpit that encourages you to excel in godliness. Then, determine that you will be godly through walking with the Master in paths He has chosen. Amen.