

“Train Yourself for Godliness” (1 Timothy 4:6–16)

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Some people will go to great lengths to train for something, whether it’s physical training, training for a sport, training to be a musician or an artist, or training for some job.

Someone I know used to work as a personal trainer. While in college, he was an NCAA Division I track and field athlete, performing in the decathlon. He went to the national championships for the pole vault. And after he graduated, he started to train people. He started working at a gym that was kind of special. For most gyms, you pay a monthly fee that can range from \$10 a month to \$50 a month or more. Then, you can go to the gym as often or as little as you want. My friend’s gym, however, was different. You could only go into the gym if you had an appointment with a personal trainer. You could have shared sessions, so that you and a friend could be trained by the same trainer at one time, or you could have one-on-one sessions. The one-on-one sessions were about \$80 an hour per session. If you wanted three of those one-hour sessions per week, the membership was \$1,000 per month. (I should add that this was in a wealthy suburb of Dallas.) I asked my friend how much people actually spent per month at his gym. He said he had clients that would spend \$700 or \$800 a month—just to get about 9 or 10 sessions with a personal trainer!

Sometimes, people don’t spend that much money to train for something, but they do spend time. When we lived in North Carolina, over ten years ago, I became friends with a great pianist. He plays the hardest classical music pieces every written for piano, pieces written by Liszt and Ravel. We talked quite a bit about music and performance and I remember very clearly something he once said. When people would hear him play, they would say things like, “Oh, I wish I had your talent.” I suppose they imagined that he was born with a special gift for music. Maybe he was. But he would tell them this: “If you want to play like I do, just practice for five hours a day for ten years.” That’s simple enough, isn’t it? Just practice for about 15,000–18,000 hours and you’ll be a musical genius!

Training can cost money or time or, in most cases, both. If you want to be good at something, even great at something, you have to train. What are you training for right now? Since training costs so much, shouldn’t we focus on training for things that matter, things that will last?

Today, we're going to talk about training. The reason we're doing that is because training is a major theme in today's passage, 1 Timothy 4:6–16. Each week, we focus on a passage in the Bible. A few months ago, we started to study 1 Timothy, which is a book in the New Testament of the Bible. It's a letter written by the apostle Paul to his younger associate, Timothy. Paul had left Timothy in a city called Ephesus, where Paul had helped establish a church some years earlier. Paul left Timothy there to straighten up the church. Apparently, some people had been teaching wrong things about how to live the Christian life, and Paul wanted Timothy to correct these teachings and to make sure the church was healthy.

In today's passage, we'll see that Paul gives Timothy some personal instructions about how to conduct his life. As a leader, Timothy was to train himself so that he could train others.

Let's read the first paragraph of today's passage, which is verses 6–10:

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. ⁷ Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; ⁸ 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. ⁹ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. ¹⁰ 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.¹

Paul begins this section of his letter by reminding Timothy to teach the things that Paul taught Timothy. "These things" refers to the content of the whole letter. Paul learned things from Jesus, and he passed those things on to Timothy, and if Timothy wanted to be a good servant of Jesus, he would pass these things on to the Christians in Ephesus.

The goal of all Christians should be to be a good servant of Christ Jesus. There's a great truth that was once recognized by a theologian named Robert Allen Zimmerman. (You may know him better as Bob Dylan.) After professing to be a Christian in the late '70s, he wrote a song called "Gotta Serve Somebody," which won a Grammy award. The refrain of the song states:

You're gonna have to serve somebody.
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord,
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

There's no better master than Jesus. Everything other master will place great burdens on us and will, in the end, fail us. Jesus doesn't.

How does one become a good servant of Jesus? By "being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that" Paul taught. Essentially, by knowing the gospel, the message of Christianity, and by living your life according to that message.

Paul then starts to command Timothy to do certain things. There are twelve imperatives, or commands, in today's passage. The first two are, "Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness." The people who were teaching false things in Ephesus taught "myths." They departed from what the word of God, the Bible, says. These things were false and irreverent, not honoring God. Instead, Timothy should train himself for godliness, to become more like Jesus, more like the person he should be. This can only come through training.

In verse 8, Paul says why training for godliness matters: "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." He doesn't deny that training your body has some value. Diet and exercise are important. By the way, the word "training" is a translation of the Greek word γυμνασία (*gymnasia*), which is where we get the word "gymnasium" from. The Bible teaches that our bodies are important. In the beginning, God made human beings to be body and soul, not just one or the other, and that's how we'll be in the end. I think it's important to take care of your body. When you don't, it's hard to serve other people. It's never too late to start bodily training. Older people can start to lift weights and get stronger, building up bone and muscle mass, increasing metabolism. That's all good.

But no matter how much we diet and exercise, we will still die. The bodies that we now have all have expiration dates. But godliness lasts forever. It's good for "the present life and also for the life to come." So, while I would encourage us to eat well and get exercise, I would encourage us even more to do the things that will train us to be godly people. That starts by knowing God, which means we must know the Bible, his written word, his communication to us. In verses 9 and 10, Paul gives us the reason for why we should train. He refers to a trustworthy saying, the reason why we should "toil and strive." The reason is that "we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe." The reason why we press on to be more like Jesus is because our hope is set on the living God.

When we read the word “hope” in the Bible, we should realize that the word has a specific meaning. We usually use the word “hope” in a different way. When we use that word, it’s like a wish that may or may not come true: “I hope it doesn’t rain today” (but it might); “I hope the Red Sox win” (but they might not); “I hope I get a raise at work” (keep dreaming). According to the Bible, hope is “the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Though we can’t see what we hope in now, we know that it will come to pass. Our hope is set on the God who is alive, the true God, the “Savior of all people.”

That phrase, “the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe,” requires some explanation. Does this mean that Jesus saves everyone? Does it mean that, in some way, “those who believe,” are particularly saved? I think there are two things we need to consider. One, the Roman emperor was known as a “god” and a “savior.” There is an inscription that was found in Ephesus. It’s on the base of a statue of Julius Caesar and probably dates back to the year 48 BC. It says that Julius Caesar was the “high priest,” “the god manifest,” and “the universal savior of human life.”² But Julius Caesar died, just like all the emperors that followed him. And they didn’t rise from the grave. The real high priest, the true God in the flesh, the true and only Savior, is Jesus. So, I suppose that Paul means that Jesus is the world’s only Savior. He is the only way to be reconciled to the only living God. No emperor could pay for your sins and erase your guilt before God. No emperor could live a perfect life that could be credited to your account, so that when God sees you, he sees a perfect human being. But that’s what Jesus did for his people.

The other thing to keep in mind is that when Paul says Jesus is the “Savior of all people,” he does not mean that all people will be saved from condemnation, that all people will be forgiven their sins and granted eternal life. That’s a nice idea, but it conflicts with what Paul teaches elsewhere and it’s simple not true, because not everyone turns to Jesus. Paul probably means that Jesus is the Savior of not only Jews, but also Gentiles. He’s the Savior of rich and poor, free people and slaves, men and women, old and young. He’s the only Savior this world will ever know. And when Paul says, “especially those who believe,” a better translation is probably, “that is, those who believe.” In other words, Paul is clarifying who “all people” are. He

² S. M. Baugh, “Savior of All People: 1 Tim 4:10 in Context,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992), 336.

doesn't mean every single person without exception. He means "without distinction." The Greek word translated as "especially" can mean "namely."³

So, since there is only one God, one Savior, and since we know that he has the power to rescue us from hell and eternal death, we should train ourselves to live lives that are pleasing to him. Because what matters, what lasts forever, is our life with God. Many of things of this world, at least as we know them, will end. But a life centered on God continues forever.

Paul then continues his message to Timothy in the next paragraph. Let's read verses 11–16:

¹¹ Command and teach these things. ¹² Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. ¹³ Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. ¹⁴ Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. ¹⁵ Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. ¹⁶ 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.

Paul starts to pile on the imperatives, or commands. The first two in this paragraph are "Command and teach these things." He probably means, "Command the false teachers to stop teaching, and teach 'these things,' the things I've taught you." There are times when a leader in a church needs to command. He doesn't need to explain. God has given church leaders the authority to simply say, "Stop it!" But there are times when teaching is required, helping people to understand who God is and what he wants us to do. Pastors need to be able to say "stop" to those who are hurting the church and they also need to teach right things about God.

In verse twelve, Paul gives two more commands to Timothy. He basically says, "Don't let anyone look down at you because you're young. But do set an example for all believers in the way you speak, the way you live, the way you trust God, the way you love, and in the purity of your life." Timothy might have been in his early-to-mid-30s at this time. Surely, there were older people in the church. But advanced age does not guarantee advanced spiritual maturity. I have seen men in their 70s and 80s in churches who were spiritually immature. They had been in churches their whole lives. But they didn't train.

³ T. C. Skeat, "'Especially the Parchments': A Note on 2 Timothy IV 13," *Journal of Theological Studies* 30 (1979) 173–77.

Think back to the examples I gave at the beginning of this message. Some people go to the gym their whole lives, but to look at them, you would never know it. Some may go to the gym and not work hard. Some might go to the gym only once or twice a week. Some may go to the gym more frequently, but most of the time they sit around and eat doughnuts, or whatever. In a similar way, some people play piano their whole lives. But they don't practice long hours and they don't work to get better. Training isn't just doing. Training is doing in a concentrated way, with the goal of improving. So, older people are not necessarily godlier people. My friend, the pianist, could play much better at age 30 than people who have played the piano for decades. That's because he trained. It's also true that God may have given him unusual abilities, such as coordination, a mind that memorizes music well, and the ability to focus. God gives certain people the ability to be pastors. And that doesn't come with age.

So, no one should look down at church leaders simply because they're younger. But Paul knew that Timothy would have to serve as an example. He would have to avoid the excesses of youth. He would have to be careful in the way he lived and the way he spoke. That's because everyone can see those things. But not only that; Timothy would have to guard some internal qualities, his faith in Jesus and his love and the purity of his life. Not everyone can see those things, though I think those qualities will be made manifest in a person's life. Later in this letter, Paul will write, "The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later" (1 Tim. 5:24). The false teachers in Ephesus probably were lacking in their conduct. They were certainly speaking lies. They didn't truly trust God and love him. Because they were leading people astray, they weren't loving others. Paul was warning Timothy not to be like that.

In verse 13, Paul gives Timothy another imperative: "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching." Timothy wasn't really a pastor or elder in the church at Ephesus. He had a unique position: he stood in the place of an apostle, Paul, a specially-commissioned representative of Jesus. The apostles taught other people what they had learned from Jesus, and they helped established churches. Timothy's job was to make sure the young church in Ephesus got on better footing. But he functioned much like a pastor. He was told to read Scripture, to encourage people to follow what Scripture says, and to teach. That's what happened in the early church. According to the second-century theologian Justin Martyr (c. 100–c.165), this is what happened on Sundays:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.⁴

We would expect that Paul should tell Timothy to read the Bible first, then teach the meaning, and then encourage people to live their lives according to what the Bible says. That's basically what I do. But perhaps the order that Paul gives is important. He tells Timothy to read, then exhort, and then teach. The only way we can truly understand God's word is if we act on it. Jesus once said, "If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority" (John 7:17). In other words, to know that Jesus' message is truly from God, you must obey Jesus first. Some theologians have taught that in order to understand, one must first believe. I think that's true. But perhaps it's more accurate to say that in order to understand, we must believe and then do. To know the truth, it can't just be an idea. To know the truth about God, we first must worship him. We don't sit in judgment on God and his word. We must submit to God. When we do that, we come to know the truth in a more profound way.

So, Timothy was supposed to persevere in his preaching and teaching ministry. He was also supposed to remember that God had appointed him to this position. In verse 14, Paul reminds Timothy that his position as a leader was a "gift." Some people had prophesied that Timothy would be a leader. The council of elders, including Paul (2 Tim. 1:6), laid their hands on Timothy. This doesn't mean that since they laid their hands on Timothy, he was magically or automatically gifted. God is the one who gives spiritual gifts as he wills (1 Cor. 12:11). But the fact that the elders laid their hands on Timothy meant that they recognized God's special call on Timothy's life. It was a sign that God had set Timothy apart for this role. And Timothy needed to remember this, because his work was hard, and Paul wanted to encourage him.

In verse 15, Paul gives Timothy two more imperatives: "Practice these things, immerse yourself in them." It's not enough for a pastor to preach a message. He must practice it. You wouldn't want a personal trainer who is obese telling you how to exercise. You might doubt that he knows what he's talking about. You wouldn't want a piano teacher who doesn't know how to

⁴ Justin Martyr, "The First Apology of Justin," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 186.

play piano well. The Christian faith isn't just ideas. We must talk about the message of Christianity, or Christian doctrine, but that message is supposed to shape your life. You don't really believe it to be true if you don't act on it.

Paul gives Timothy an added incentive to practice what he preached. Paul knew that people were watching Timothy. Timothy was an example, and if people saw that he was a hypocrite, it would do harm to the faith. That's why Timothy was supposed to "keep a close watch" on his life as well as "on the teaching." Pastors must be careful to guard both their personal lives as well as what they say. It's not enough to be careful in your preaching and doctrine if you aren't living a life that lines up with what you say.

Recently, I heard about a pastor and seminary professor, someone who was very highly regarded, who had been having an affair. The other elders of his church found out about this and confronted him. He admitted to having another affair years earlier. So, he was fired from his position at his church and from the seminary. When I found out about that, I thought, "I wonder how this man could preach every week, knowing that he was having an affair." Obviously, his sin caught up with him. It always does. It's easy to say something, but it's a lot harder to live a life that lines up with what we profess to believe. That's true of all of us. We're not all pastors. Most Christians aren't going to serve as leaders. But all of us should practice what we profess to believe. A pastor's egregious sin does more damage, but we're all called to live godly lives. Someone is always watching us. Non-Christians are observing how we live. So are angels and demons. But, most importantly, God is watching.

Timothy was given added incentive for making sure his life matched his teaching. Paul says, "Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." That may strike us as odd. How can Timothy save himself, let alone others? If this is all that we heard of Christianity, we might believe that Christianity was a religion of doing good works in order to be rewarded by God. We might think that we earn our way to heaven by sheer will, by training to live moral lives and then getting a high enough score. But that's not how it works. Elsewhere, Paul says, "a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16; also Rom. 3:28). The reason that is so is because our sin is so great that it taints everything. Sin is a power that corrupts every part of our lives. And God will not put up with that corruption forever. If we want to live with God, we need to have sin removed from us, and we can't do that job ourselves. In short, we can never measure up to God's standards, no matter how moral we

are. We all fail to love God perfectly. Therefore, we fail to obey God perfectly. We can't remove our own sins. So, Christianity is not a way to save yourself.

But Christianity does recognize that God uses people to help save us. If you hear this message today and come to believe that it's true, if you recognize that Jesus is your only hope of being right with God, and if you trust him, you are saved from condemnation. Ultimately, that is all a gift of God. So, in that sense, you didn't save yourself, and I certainly didn't save you. I'm just a messenger. But the Bible can also speak of us working hard to save others or even to save ourselves. For example, in 1 Corinthians 9, Paul says, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). Paul knew that God did the saving. But Paul also recognized that how he lived and how he ministered mattered. He realized that he must do what God wanted him to do so that people could hear about Jesus, be transformed by God, and therefore be saved. Paul knew this was all God's doing; it was all according to God's plan. But Paul also knew that he had to play his role. That's why Paul worked so hard.

In that same passage, 1 Corinthians 9, Paul writes this:

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:24–27).

Paul saw his life as an athletic event, a marathon. He disciplined his body. He disciplined his preaching. He *trained* to live a godly life. And he asked Timothy to do the same thing.

In another one of his letters, Paul told Christians to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12–13). Salvation is a gift, but it's meant to be "worked out," to be exercised, to be practiced. Yet even our work is a gift because it is God who works in us. He is the one who gives us the strength to obey. He is the one who gives us new hearts to love God so that we want to obey. All of this is a gift. But we must still take that gift and use it.

The reason we should train ourselves to live godly lives is because Paul told Timothy to do that, and Timothy serves as an example for church leaders, and pastors are supposed to be examples to their congregations (1 Pet. 5:3), and congregations are supposed to obey their

pastors (Heb. 13:17). But if we're looking for a greater reason to train ourselves to live godly lives, we should look no further than Jesus.

Jesus is the Son of God. He has always been God. Yet, over two thousand years ago, he also became a human being. He is both God and man, which is why I sometimes call him the God-man. And, as a man, he had to train himself. Though as God he is omniscient, as a human being, he had to learn. He had to study the Scriptures. He clearly had memorized much of the Old Testament, because he quoted it frequently. He had to train himself to pray. He struggled to obey, particularly when he was about to be arrested, tortured, and killed. He struggled to obey in the garden of Gethsemane, knowing that he was about to drink the cup of God's wrath. That cup is a metaphor for God's judgment against sin. In short, Jesus knew that when he died on the cross, he was going to go through hell on earth. And that required effort.

Consider what the book of Hebrews says about Jesus. Hebrews 5:7–9 says,

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. ⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

Jesus needed to obey God perfectly in order to fulfill God's designs for humanity. And, as a human being, he learned obedience through effort, including enduring great suffering. In a sense, he was already perfect and complete. He is God, after all. But as a man, he was made complete through his obedience in suffering. His training, we might say, enabled him to become "the source of eternal salvation." And this comes to those who obey Jesus. It doesn't come because we obey. But those who truly trust in Jesus will obey, even if that obedience isn't perfect. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

So, what are you training for? What does your life say about you? If an outside observer looked at your life, would they think, "Wow, that person is training hard to be the best television watcher ever! This person is training to consume, that person is training to be a great eater, that person is training to become a great Red Sox fan . . ."—you get the idea. What we spend our time, our energy, our money on has a way of training us. What we do shapes who we are. Our habits often direct our hearts. Do our habits train us to focus on God and live for him, or are they pointing us away from God? Don't say, "But I go to church every Sunday." That's important.

But people who go to the gym once a week can still be in horrible shape. We need to live daily for God. We need to continue to read the Bible, to pray, and to obey.

Gathering together is a great way to train. Coming earlier on Sunday mornings so that you can come to our Bible study at 9:15 is a great way to train. Coming on Wednesday nights at 7 p.m. to join us in Bible reading and prayer is another great way to train. If you want personal training, I'm available. You don't even have to pay for it, though giving to the church is another way of training. The point is that following Jesus requires effort, and the process should last our whole lives.

If we live for God, what we do matters and it will last forever. If we're not living for God, our lives are grass that fades, a mist that evaporates. I urge us all to train for what is eternal. Don't waste your life on things that will fade away. Turn to Jesus. Train for the marathon that is the Christian life. And get ready for the infinite journey that awaits you when this life gives way to eternity.