

ADVICE A YOUNG PASTOR

by Ray C. Stedman

I feel a great affinity to the section of the Apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy which we will be looking at this morning. I came to Palo Alto at the age of thirty-two, fresh out of seminary, not yet dry behind the ears, to work with men who were older than I. Many of these men had been Christians longer than I, some of them had national status as Christian leaders, yet I was expected not only to minister the Scriptures before them but at times to work with them and even to correct some of the things that were being taught or viewpoints that were held.

I came here in September of 1950, having just spent a whole summer of fellowship and of ministry with Dr. H. A. Ironside, who was like a father in the faith to me. I felt very much as Timothy must have felt when Paul left him in Ephesus. The apostle had written to Timothy, charging him with training the pastors and elders of the church there, and giving him very specific instructions as to how to go about this.

Here are Paul's words, found in Chapter 4, Verse 11:

Command and teach these things. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. {1 Tim 4:11-12 RSV}

Timothy had been given a very difficult task. By this time he was in his mid-30's, having spent fifteen years traveling with the apostle all through the Roman Empire. Back in those days, you were not considered to be over the hill until you got to forty at least, and that is why Paul tells Timothy, "Let no one despise your youth." But it was a difficult situation, because Timothy had to minister with men who had already been elders of the church in Ephesus for a number of years. These men had been taught by the Apostle Paul himself, and yet, as the opening chapter makes clear, Timothy was expected to correct some of the things that were going on in the church. The third verse of the letter says:

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith; {1 Tim 1:3-4 RSV}

That was a tough assignment for a young man. Timothy had to know how to go about it in a way that would not arouse the ire and opposition of others. Paul instructs him in the way a young man should minister among those who are older than he.

It is clear from this passage that *that* requires a whole life to be aimed in the right direction. I have always thought of the public Christian ministry as a battlefield in which one battles against powerful forces of evil and darkness. I have thought of this battle in terms of a fighter pilot doing battle with swift and skillful foes coming at him from various directions. But when a young man first enters the ministry he tends to think of the battle in terms of the old World War I-type bombers, which had a pilot who flew a steady course, while a gunner aimed his swivel-mounted machine gun at the enemy. Many young pastors aim the machine gun of Scripture at people, shooting at everybody who is out-of-line.

Somebody once called these young men, "flamethrowers" -- they like to burn a congregation. Charles Spurgeon, in a lecture to his students in London in the last century said, "Beware of being like some, who go about with theological revolvers in their ecclesiastical trousers." Some young men have a tendency to shoot from the lip. Modern-day jet fighters, however, give us a better picture of how the battle in the public Christian ministry is fought: Today the whole plane has to be aimed in order to bear upon the target. Here the apostle tells Timothy that his whole life has to be aimed at his objective.

There are two things the apostle tells Timothy to do and both are highlighted by two similar-sounding words, the monosyllables, *let*, and *set*: "Let no one despise your youth, but set a good example before them." When Paul says, "Let no one despise your youth," he does not mean, of course, that Timothy is to go around and take issue with anybody who does not like him. He means, rather, that Timothy is to be concerned about and aware of how he comes across to people; he is to be sensitive to how others see him.

That requires a knowledge of what it is in a young man's word that turns off older people. Many young people are unaware of how they sound to others. Perhaps one of the most common causes of a young man's ministry being rejected is the presence of what might be called youthful arrogance. This is often innocent -- the young person is not aware that he sounds or acts or seems this way -- but it is an unwarranted dogmatism, an appearing to be an authority without an adequate basis of experience. Many a young man makes that mistake. The Old Testament reminds us: "Let not him that girds on his armor boast himself as he that puts it off," {1 Ki 20:11 RSV}. Paul is urging young men to be aware of how they come across to older people.

But, somebody says, Paul says here, "command and teach these things." Young men especially love that word, "command." We all do; everybody likes to command. I hear my little two-year-old grandson commanding his brothers out in the yard, ordering them around. It comes naturally to us to command, to tell people what to do. I am sorry that this version translates it that way because the word is really not, "command," rather, it is, "proclaim," "announce." What Paul has said earlier in Verse 6, "Put these instructions before the brethren," is a very good amplification of what this word means. Call their attention to them, but not in an authoritative, a self-assertive way; that is the idea.

This week I was reading through the journals of Francis Asbury, the outstanding young Methodist missionary who began the work of Methodism here in America. John Wesley sent him to this country to preach in the Eastern Colonies when he was twenty-six years of age. This young man rode on horseback through the Colonies, preaching everywhere he went. His record of riding horseback and preaching is probably unequalled in all history. It has been estimated that he rode 250,000 miles during the course of his ministry. Let me share with you a couple of entries from Francis Asbury's journal:

I packed up my clothes and books to be ready for my departure, and had an agreeable conversation with Mr. O. The next day some of my friends were so unguarded and imprudent as to commend me to my face. Satan, ready for every advantage, seized the opportunity and assaulted me with self-pleasing, self-exalting ideas, but the Lord enabled me to discover the danger, and the snare was broken. May He ever keep me humble and little and mean in my own eyes.

Another entry reads:

The Lord is pleased to show me the danger in which a preacher is of being lifted up by pride and falling into the condemnation of the devil. How great is the danger of this! A considerable degree of ballast is highly necessary to bear frequent and sudden puffs of applause. Lord, fill me with genuine humility that the strongest gust from Satan or the world may never move me.

It is not surprising that a young man with that kind of attitude accomplished a magnificent work in the Colonies. He provided the impetus for the Methodist Circuit Riders who later rode west, spreading the gospel as they went. As a young man in Montana, I remember talking to people who had known the ministry of one of those great Methodist Circuit Riders, Brother Van, who became one of the best-known men in Montana territory. He wore a big broad-brimmed hat, shot buffalo, and preached the gospel in all the saloons in Montana. This kind of ministry was made possible because these young men early understood that they must have a consciousness of the danger they faced of being arrogant, puffed-up and assertive in their ministry.

How then is a young man to proceed? The apostle says by setting a good example in two areas -- speech and conduct -- and three qualities ought to come through -- love, faithfulness, and purity. Those are the things that ought to characterize every young preacher: loving, faithful, pure speech, and loving, faithful, pure behavior.

A young preacher must, first of all, be loving. Not arrogant, not rude, not censorious, not critical, cruel or sharp in either word or deed.

And he must be faithful to his commitments, not toadying and flattering, using insincere words, not being irresponsible, unreliable and breaking promises.

The third quality is purity. I do not know anything that has destroyed more young ministers than impurity.

Ephesus was a city given over to sexual immorality -- it was more prevalent there than it is even in California today -- yet Timothy was expected to maintain a pure standard in the midst of that. There was to be no vulgar, obscene or profane words in his speech, no dirty stories or double meanings, and there was to be no sexual misconduct; no petting, no making-out, no indulging in pornography on the side. A pure life is the platform from which an effective ministry proceeds; without that all the words mean nothing. Somebody put that well in a Sunday School class this morning. He said he had learned "not to talk the talk, but to walk the walk." That is the platform that keeps people from despising a young man or a young woman's ministry.

Paul now turns to the public ministry of the Word. Here we are, in a way, invited to look inside the pulpit ministry, what lies behind it, and how it comes into being. Paul says (Verse 13):

Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you. Practice these duties, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. {1 Tim 4:13-16 RSV}

In Chapter 2, Paul covered the place of prayer in public service, and now he turns to the subject of preaching. He tells Timothy that a preaching ministry ought to consist of reading the Scriptures in public, exhorting, and teaching.

Notice the centrality of the Scriptures there. Timothy is to read the Scriptures; then he is to exhort, to urge, to proclaim, to open up and make clear what the Scriptures say; and he is to teach, to explain the Scriptures. All this focuses on the Word of God. A congregation meets so that they might

- Hear the Word of God,
- Taught by a man of God,
- Led by the Spirit of God,

implanting that Word into every individual life and heart. That is what a Sunday morning service is supposed to consist of, and that is what Paul urges upon Timothy here in Ephesus.

Then Paul gives us three steps in the process behind this.

First, notice that he says, (Verse 14):

Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the council of elders laid their hands upon you. {1 Tim 4:14 RSV}

Paul has referred to this gift earlier in this letter, and he does again in Second Timothy when he says to Timothy, "Rekindle the gift of God that is within you," {2 Tim 1:6 RSV}.

All believers are given a spiritual gift when they come to Christ. This is not merely for pastors and preachers. The point the apostle makes is that, having been given a spiritual gift, Timothy is expected to use it. There is a good deal of debate among the scholars as to what Timothy's gift was. Some think it may have been evangelism, because Paul, in his second letter to Timothy, says, "Do the work of an evangelist." Some think it was a pastor-teacher gift. I personally think it was that, but it may be both gifts, because God gives more than one gift to many of his people. Whatever it was, Paul urged Timothy to use it, and thus give a particular personal slant to his ministry.

A spiritual gift gives a personal flavor to a ministry because of the unique ability a man possesses by the use of

his gift. This means that if a man is an evangelist he will look at the Scriptures evangelistically; if he is a pastor he will be looking at Scripture from the standpoint of feeding the sheep; if he is a teacher he will look at Scripture with a view to instructing the mind.

We have a wonderful example of this right here at Peninsula Bible Church. Various men share the platform here and they all handle Scripture in different ways. Steve Zeisler has a gift of analyzing. When you hear him, or read his messages, you note that he has insight into what the Scripture says, a penetrating insight into what exactly is the principle of life behind it. That is a manifestation of what Paul, in First Corinthians, calls the gift of wisdom, the ability to discern unusual insights from Scripture.

Brian Morgan has the gift of synthesizing, putting together various Scriptures. That is what the New Testament would call the gift of knowledge -- being able to bring together various passages so that they come into focus and stress a certain line of teaching in a very effective and powerful way. Ron Ritchie has the gift of dramatizing! He paints with very brilliant colors. That is what the Scripture would call a manifestation of the gift of exhortation, and that is why everyone loves to hear Ron because it is colorful, exciting. Bob Smith has a gift for systematizing -- that is the gift of teaching, putting Scripture in a logical order, the one-two-three of truth. All of these approaches are unique, but they are all dealing with Scripture. We ought to rejoice that we have these many different approaches.

In First Corinthians 3 the apostle makes clear that it is a weakening, even sinful thing for a congregation to choose up and identify themselves as only accepting one man's ministry. That is the flesh. Paul says. It is immature to say, "I like so-and-so." while someone else says, "I like so-and-so." That is what the Corinthians were saying: "I like Paul," "I like Apollos," "I like Cephas." Paul says it is childish to talk that way. God is using every man uniquely in his way.

The second thing Paul says is, prepare thoroughly. Verse 15:

Practice these duties, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. {1 Tim 4:15 RSV}

It takes hours of thorough preparation to give a 35-minute message here on Sunday morning. Many of you in the congregation have no idea how much work is put into it. It's not a matter of standing up and sharing some things off the top of your head, things that occurred to you Saturday night or early Sunday morning. You can hear that kind of preaching in many places, but it is very evident that it is a shallow and superficial approach to Scripture.

A preacher must examine Scripture carefully. He must:

- Outline it,
- Meditate on it,
- Research it,
- Ask and answer questions in his own mind about it,
- Look up the meanings of words in the lexicons and books.
- Look for illustrations,
- Think through an introduction and a conclusion to his message,

and yet do all this without becoming mechanical or artificial. That takes a lot of work. Many of you perhaps think it is easy to stand up here and talk until you actually have to do so. I have watched people's knees shaking, their faces turning pale merely because they have to make an announcement, let alone deliver a message. No, preaching requires careful preparation of the heart, especially, as well as the mind.

Years ago I pasted in the front of my New Testament part of a poem by Henry van Dyke. I read it frequently because it is a prayer that says:

Grant us the knowledge that we need
To solve the questions of the mind.

Light Thou our candles while we read
To keep our hearts from going blind.
Enlarge our vision to behold
The wonders Thou hast wrought of old.

That represents an awareness that the book from which we teach is the Word of the living God. It is not a book review written by men, but it is the insightful analysis of life as it really is. It requires careful and prolonged handling, and a discipline that refuses certain diversions in order to give itself to this kind of labor.

The third thing the apostle says is, keep it personal.

Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. {1 Tim 4:16 RSV}

There is a profound psychological principle stated there, and that is that you can only give to others what you yourself have first experienced, nothing more. A pastor can never bring anyone to a maturity which he himself does not possess; he cannot lead anyone further than he himself has gone. Pastors, preachers and teachers must themselves be growing and impacted by the Word; they must be changed and continually progressing. This is why Paul says here to Timothy, "That all may see your progress." The Word must first become personal to his own heart.

When Paul says, "You will save both yourself and your hearers," he is not talking about redemption. Timothy was already saved by the grace of God, and so were most of his hearers. The word is used in the same sense as Paul uses it in Philippians 2:13, where he says: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who is at work in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure," {Phil 2:12b-13 RSV}. Paul is talking about salvation in the sense of fulfillment, maturity, experienced deliverance from evil and growing in the Lord; that is the idea.

I want to confess to you that I occasionally take one of my own messages and read it through. I am not trying to bolster my ego when I do so. In fact, it has the opposite effect upon me: it often humbles me. I see all the awkward phrasings, the unclear sentences and the mistakes in grammar and I am aware again of what a feeble instrument the Lord has to work with. But the truth blesses me anew. I remember the freshness with which the Word came to me when I was laboring on the message, how it opened my eyes in new ways, and made me make commitments which I need to recall. Reading through those messages affects me as though I were reading something that someone else had said. This, of course, indicates that it is not my work, it is God's work; it is his Word that is coming through. I am reminded of what power lies in the preached word when it ministers to me. I have the privilege of standing up every Sunday morning and ministering to two thousand people and that Word is multiplied. The same effect occurs in hundreds of hearts; homes are altered, business relationships are changed, people who would otherwise be divided are brought together again.

The power of the Word of God is magnificently enhanced by the preaching of a pastor who has faithfully done his work and who is ministering in the power of the Spirit. This is what Paul urges upon young Timothy. "You are in a very strategic spot," he says to Timothy. "In this ungodly city with all its pagan vices, its immorality, its widespread superstition, blindness and darkness you are in the position of instructing the people of God to so believe the truth of God that their lives will make impact throughout the city and the surrounding area. There will be a noticeable lifting of the level of life; people will be healed and homes changed. All that is committed to you," Paul tells him.

I do not know anything more exciting than that, nor anything I would rather do than open the Word of God, and proclaim it in the power of the Spirit of God. So I relate to this message to Timothy whether you do or not.

But it will have an effect upon your lives also. Many of you have an opportunity to be proclaimers of the Word so I hope you will, take these things to heart. Remember that the only platform from which effective ministry proceeds is the ministry of one who is inculcating love, faithfulness and purity in both speech and behavior into his life; one who takes the Word of God and utilizes the gift of the Spirit to prepare thoroughly so that the

Word ministers to his heart and thus to the hearts of the whole congregation. That is God's formula for a successful ministry.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for this mighty Word. You sent your Word and healed men; you spoke and worlds came into being; you spoke and delivered people by the Word of truth. Lord, we thank you for the power of your Word; the most powerful force in all the universe is the Word of truth. We pray that we may give heed to it, believe it, accept it, live by it, walk in it, work by it, let it change our lives to be the men and women you want us to be in this generation. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Advice to a Young Pastor
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Studies in First Timothy
Scripture: 1 Tim 4:11-16
Message No: 13
Catalog No: 3776
Date: Unknown Date in 1981

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