



LESSON FOUR

A Good Minister of Christ

Scripture Reading:

1 TIMOTHY 4:1-16

- 4:1 But the Spirit says expressly that in later times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons
- 4:2 By means of the hypocrisy of men who speak lies, of men who are branded in their own conscience as with a hot iron,
- 4:3 Who forbid marriage and command abstaining from foods, which God has created to be partaken of with thanksgiving by those who believe and have full knowledge of the truth.
- 4:4 For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if received with thanksgiving;
- 4:5 For it is sanctified through the word of God and intercession.
- 4:6 If you lay these things before the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, being nourished with the words of the faith and of the good teaching which you have closely followed.
- 4:7 But the profane and old-womanish myths refuse, and exercise yourself unto godliness.
- 4:8 For bodily exercise is profitable for a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the present life and of that which is to come.
- 4:9 Faithful is the word and worthy of all acceptance.
- 4:10 For to this end we labor and strive, because we have set our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.
- 4:11 Charge and teach these things.
- 4:12 Let no one despise your youth, but be a pattern to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.
- 4:13 Until I come, attend to the public reading, to the exhortation, to the teaching.
- 4:14 Do not neglect the gift which is in you, which was given to you by means of prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.
- 4:15 Practice these things; be in them, that your progress may be manifest to all.
- 4:16 Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things; for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

QUESTIONS:

SECTION 1:

1. Explain how God speaks in the New Testament through the principle of incarnation.
2. How can we hear the Spirit speaking today?
3. What causes some to depart from the faith?
4. How can we be safeguarded from the demonic and hypocritical teaching of deceiving liars?

SECTION 2:

1. According to verse 3, what is the teaching of the demons?
2. What is God's ordination for food and marriage?
3. How should we partake of our food?
4. Explain verse 5.

SECTION 3:

1. What is a minister of Christ?
2. What is the requirement for one to be a good minister of Christ?
3. What is the proof that gives us the ground to say that a minister of Christ does not merely teach but minister Christ into others as food?
4. What are the words of faith and the good teaching mentioned in verse 6?

SECTION 4:

1. What does the Greek word for profane mean?
2. What does it mean to exercise unto godliness?
3. What was Paul's charge to Timothy?
4. What are the two functions of the laying on of hands by the elders?

I. THE SPIRIT'S PREDICTION

In 4:1 Paul says, "But the Spirit says expressly that in later times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons." The fact that this verse begins with the word "but" indicates that what follows is in contrast to what is mentioned in 3:15 and 16. At the end of chapter three, Paul reached the high point of the four Epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, presenting a glorious picture of the church. However, in 4:1-5, he describes something very dark, something much in contrast to the situation in 3:15 and 16.

In 4:1 Paul uses the expression "the Spirit says expressly." This is the Spirit who dwells in our spirit and speaks to us there (Rom. 8:9-11, 16). We need to exercise our spirit that it may become keen and clear to listen to the Spirit's speaking and be kept from the deceiving spirits and teachings of demons.

Many...follow the Old Testament way of prophesying and say, "Thus saith the Lord." This expression cannot be found in the New Testament. In the New Testament we see the principle of incarnation. According to this principle, God does not speak directly. Rather, He speaks through man. First, in Jesus Christ God became incarnated and mingled with man. Now after the death and resurrection of Christ, it is possible for Him to be one spirit with those who believe in Christ. In 1 Corinthians 6:17 Paul declares, "He that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit." This refers to the mingled spirit, the divine Spirit mingled with the regenerated human spirit. In the New Testament it is this mingled spirit which does the speaking. For this reason, 4:1 does not say, "The Spirit of God says," nor, "The Holy Spirit says." Instead, this verse reads, "The Spirit says..." According to the principle of incarnation revealed in the New Testament, this implies our spirit. We have seen that the principle of incarnation means that divinity is brought into humanity and works with humanity. Hence, when the Spirit speaks, He speaks within our spirit, through our spirit, and out from our spirit. If there were no one who was truly one spirit with the speaking God, there would be no way, according to the New Testament principle, for God to speak.

Paul took the lead to be one spirit with the Lord. Because he was one with Him in this way, Paul was able to speak a great deal for the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul says definitely that concerning a particular matter he does not have a word from the Lord, but that he gives his opinion, his judgment, as one who has received the mercy of the Lord to be faithful (v. 25). But as we read this portion of the Bible today, we see that Paul's word is in fact the word of the Lord. When Paul spoke, the Triune God, who has been processed to become the Spirit and who was mingled with Paul's regenerated spirit, spoke from within him. We also have such a mingled spirit within us today. It is in and through this mingled spirit that the Spirit speaks expressly.

First Timothy 4:1 is a continuation of 3:15 and 16. No doubt, these latter verses were Paul's words. Now in 4:1 Paul says that the Spirit speaks expressly. Where was the Spirit speaking? There can be no doubt that the Spirit was speaking from within Paul. As Paul was writing to Timothy about the church as the house of God, the pillar and base of the truth, and the great mystery of godliness, the Spirit was speaking in his spirit. This is not the Spirit who suddenly descends upon us and causes us to prophesy, "Thus saith the Lord." The speaking of the Spirit in 4:1 is according to the way of incarnation. The Spirit spoke from within Paul's spirit.

If we would hear the speaking of the Spirit, we need to exercise our spirit. Only our spirit can listen to the speaking of the Spirit. The mind is not qualified for this; it lacks the ability to listen to the Spirit's speaking. The Spirit speaks to our spirit, and our spirit responds to the Spirit. Therefore, as we read 1 Timothy, we must exercise our spirit to listen to the Spirit speaking from within the spirit of the Apostle Paul.

II. DEPARTING FROM THE FAITH

According to 4:1, the Spirit says that in later times some will depart from the faith. The later times, or after times, refer to times after the writing of this book. This differs from the last days in 2 Timothy 3:1, which denote the closing period of this age.

As he was writing this Epistle, Paul realized that in time to come some would depart from the faith. In this verse the faith is objective and refers to the contents of our belief. On the one hand, Paul was

bold and encouraged, not in the least disappointed. He believed that the church was the house of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth, and even the mystery of godliness. On the other hand, deep within his spirit, he knew that certain so-called believers would depart from the faith, from God's New Testament economy. Paul could know this because the Spirit who was mingled with his spirit revealed it to him. This departure from God's New Testament economy would be the beginning of the decline of the church life.

Paul says that those who depart from the faith will give heed to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons...According to the Bible, there are two categories of evil spirits. The deceiving spirits in 4:1 are in contrast to the Spirit, as mentioned in 1 John 4:1, 3, and 6. These are the fallen angels who followed Satan in his rebellion and became his subordinates, who work for his kingdom of darkness (Matt. 25:41; Eph. 6:12). Demons are the unclean and evil spirits (Matt. 12:22, 43; Luke 8:2) of the living creatures on earth in the pre-adamic age who joined Satan's rebellion and were judged by God. After being judged, they became demons, working on earth for Satan's kingdom. The demons differ from the deceiving spirits, the fallen angels. The fallen angels are in the air, whereas the demons are active on earth.

In verse 1 Paul speaks of both the deceiving spirits in the air and the demons on earth. Among Christians today there are deceptive doctrines which come from the deceiving spirits in the air and also teachings which originate with demons. The history of the church has proved that Paul was right in saying that such teachings and doctrines would come in and that those who depart from the faith would give heed to them.

In verse 2 Paul continues, "In the hypocrisy of men who speak lies, seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron." The phrase "in the hypocrisy of men who speak lies" modifies teachings of demons in verse 1. The teachings of demons are carried out in the hypocrisy of those who lie. This indicates that demons and lying speakers collaborate to deceive people. These hypocrites work together with evil spirits and demons to bring in deceitful teachings and demonic doctrines.

The conscience of hypocritical liars has lost its sense as if seared with a hot branding iron, an iron

used to brand the slaves and cattle of a certain owner. This book strongly stresses the conscience. In the church life the love which is contrary to envy and discord is of a good conscience (1:5). Those who thrust away a good conscience become shipwrecked regarding the faith (1:19). The serving ones in the church must hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience (3:9). To keep a good and pure conscience is to keep the conscience sensitive in its function. This will safeguard us from the demonic and hypocritical teachings of deceiving liars.

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Verse 3 says, "Forbidding to marry, commanding to abstain from foods which God has created to be partaken of with thanksgiving by those who believe and have fully known the truth." Marriage and eating were ordained by God. Eating is for the existence of mankind, and marriage for the continuation and multiplication of mankind. Satan, on the one hand, causes men to abuse these two things in the indulgence of their lustful flesh; on the other hand, he causes men to be unbalanced in the way of asceticism by forbidding marriage and the eating of certain foods. This is a demonic teaching!

Marriage was ordained by God for the carrying out of God's purpose with man. Food is necessary to sustain mankind to exist on earth for the fulfillment of God's purpose. But Satan, through the deceiving spirits and the teachings of demons with the collaboration of hypocrites and liars, seeks to destroy these things, either causing people to abuse them through indulgence or to practice asceticism.

III. THE TRUTH CONCERNING FOOD

In verse 3 Paul speaks of "foods which God has created to be partaken of with thanksgiving." All edible things were created by God for men to live on. We should partake of them with thanksgiving to God out of a grateful heart.

Because all food is God's gift to us, we should receive it with thanksgiving. As we partake of our food, we should say, "Lord, thank You." However, we do not have to follow the traditional ritual of saying a so-called word of grace. On the one hand, I do not agree with the practice of such a ritual; on the other hand, I do not agree with neglecting to thank the Lord for the food He has given us. I can testify that I thank the Lord again and again for my

food. I even thank Him for a glass of water and say, "Lord, this water is a gift from You, and I thank You for it." Those who practice saying "grace" usually do so before they start eating. But we should thank the Lord for our food not only before we eat it, but also while we are partaking of it and when we have finished our meal. Furthermore, we may express our thanks for each particular item we eat.

The foods God has created should be partaken of with thanksgiving "by those who believe and have fully known the truth." To believe is to be saved and thus begin in the spiritual life. To have fully known the truth is to realize God's purpose in His economy and to grow unto maturity in the spiritual life. God desires all men to be saved and to come to the full knowledge of the truth (2:4). The truth here is God's New Testament economy. As those who are saved by believing in the Lord Jesus for salvation and who know the content, the reality, of God's economy concerning Christ as the mystery of God and the church as the mystery of Christ, we should be thankful for all the food we eat. Those who believe and who know the truth are qualified to receive their food with thanksgiving. We know that we are living on earth for God and for His purpose. Thus, we receive what He has prepared for our sustenance, and we thank Him for it all.

In verses 4 and 5 Paul goes on to say, "For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, being received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified through the word of God and intercession." The statement that "every creature of God is good" is contrary both to Gnosticism, which teaches that some created things are evil, and to ascetic teachings that command men to abstain from certain foods. Some insist that we should eat only vegetables and not meat. But according to Paul's word, every creature of God is good.

Furthermore, Paul says that "nothing is to be rejected." In the past, I politely said, "No, thank you," when I was served certain foods at Cantonese feasts...But according to Paul's word, we should not reject anything created by Him, but receive all things with thanksgiving.

In verse 5 Paul concludes, "For it is sanctified through the word of God and intercession." All the food we eat can be sanctified, separated unto God for His purpose, through the word of God and intercession. Here the word of God refers to the word of our prayer addressed to God, of which part may be quotations from the Scriptures, or part,

messages we hear and read. In this verse intercession refers to our prayer to God for the food we eat. Such prayer separates our food from being common and sanctifies it unto God for His purpose, that is, to nourish us that we may live for Him.

Many versions do not have the boldness to use the word intercession, even though this is the meaning of the Greek word. Instead, they render the Greek word as prayer. But here Paul is definitely saying that we should make intercession for our food. We may pray for ourselves, but we intercede either for someone else or for something. According to Paul's word in this verse, we need to intercede for our food and ask the Lord to sanctify it. Whenever we sit down to eat, we should pray for the food and make intercession for it, saying, "Lord, sanctify this food for Your purpose that it may nourish Your servant. Lord, I believe, and I know the truth. I am here on earth for You and for Your economy. I need this food, and I ask that it be sanctified, separated, to Yourself for the fulfillment of Your economy." In the eyes of God, after intercession has been made for our food in this way, the food becomes holy. This is the proper way to receive our God-given food with thanksgiving.

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IV. A GOOD MINISTER OF CHRIST

In 4:6 Paul uses the expression "a good minister of Christ Jesus." A minister of Christ is one who serves others with Christ, ministering Christ as Savior, life, life supply, and every positive thing. He differs from a teacher of the law and of other things (1:7, 3).

A. Laying These Things Before the Brothers

A minister of Christ does not mainly denote a minister who belongs to Christ, but a person who ministers Christ to others. He is one who serves people with Christ. For example, if we say that a man is a serving one of a particular meal, we do not mean, of course, that he belongs to the meal. We mean that he serves others with that meal. In like manner, although it is true that a minister of Christ belongs to Christ, the main thought here is that he serves others with Christ, ministering Christ to them. Not only does he belong to Christ, but he serves Christ to others.

To be a minister of Christ does not primarily mean to preach Christ, teach Christ, or tell others about

Christ. The main significance of this term is ministering Christ to others.

Verse 6 confirms this understanding of the expression “a good minister of Christ.” Here Paul says, “Laying these things before the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, being nourished with the words of the faith and of the good teaching which you have closely followed.” By “these things” Paul means all he has covered thus far in this Epistle. Just as a steward lays different courses of food before guests at a dinner, so a good minister of Christ should lay “these things” before the believers. Furthermore, Paul’s use of the term “being nourished” indicates that his concept is that of supplying life to others. It is significant that here Paul does not say “being taught,” but “being nourished” with the words of the faith. If we would minister Christ to others, we ourselves must first be nourished. Being nourished with Christ, we shall have Christ as food, as life supply, to minister to others. The words “being nourished” give us the ground to say that a good minister of Christ does not merely teach others about Christ, but ministers Christ into others as food. Others should be able to testify of us that we have nourished them with Christ.

If you have a heart to care for others...you should not give them mere teaching. Whenever you fellowship with others concerning Christ, you may give them some knowledge. But while you are teaching them, you need to exercise your spirit to minister spiritual food that they may be nourished. If you do this, you will be a good minister of Christ.

With Paul and Timothy we see an excellent pattern. As we have pointed out, Paul told Timothy to lay “these things before the brothers,” referring to the things which he was writing in this Epistle. However, before Timothy could lay these things before others, he first had to feed on them himself. He had to digest them, assimilate them, and allow them to saturate his inner being. Then he would be able to lay them before the brothers. Today we should follow Timothy’s example and lay before the saints the things with which we have been nourished by the Lord through the ministry. How wonderful the church life would be if we all did this! However, if we turn from the ministry and seek to produce something different, we may give place to differing teachings. It was not Timothy’s intention to teach anything different from what

Paul taught. Rather, he would lay before the brothers what he had received from Paul.

We must find a way to share with them the spiritual riches the Lord has provided us. Many who truly love the Lord are starving. We must take up the burden to supply them with food. We all need to be good ministers of Christ, serving others with His riches. Let us first be nourished ourselves and then minister this nourishment to all the people of God.

We would emphasize that being nourished is for the growth in life. This is a matter of life and it differs from merely being taught, which is a matter of knowledge. To minister Christ to others requires that we ourselves first be nourished with the words of life concerning Christ.

B. Being Nourished

In verse 6 Paul specifically speaks of “being nourished with the words of the faith and of the good teaching.” The words of the faith are the words of the full gospel concerning God’s New Testament economy. The focus of God’s economy is not the image in Daniel 2 or the four beasts in Daniel 7. If you want to see the focal point of God’s economy, study the book of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. We need to be nourished with the words of the faith, God’s economy, found in these books.

According to verse 6, we should also be nourished with the good teaching which we have closely followed. The words of the good teaching are the sweet words that contain and convey the riches of Christ to nourish, edify, and strengthen His believers. Actually, the words of the faith and the words of the good teaching refer to the same thing. If we would teach others, we ourselves must first follow these words closely. Following them closely and being nourished with them, we shall then be able to feed others. For example, if a mother does not know how to nourish herself properly, she will not know how to feed healthy food to her children. Through her own experience of being nourished, she will know what food is best for her children. This illustrates the fact that as good ministers of Christ, we must first be nourished ourselves with the words of the faith and of the good teaching which we have closely followed, and then we shall be able to nourish others.

V. REFUSING PROFANE AND OLD-WOMANISH TALES

In verse 7 Paul goes on to say, “But the profane and old-womanish tales refuse, and exercise yourself unto godliness.” The Greek word for profane means touching and being touched by worldliness, contrary to being holy. If we would exercise ourselves unto godliness, we must refuse profane and old-womanish tales...We should forget these tales and come back to the pure word of the Bible. In the so-called services among Christians today, there is a great deal of profane, secular, and worldly talk. People discuss politics and how to be successful in business. All this is profane talk, comparable to old-womanish tales.

VI. EXERCISING UNTO GODLINESS

Refusing the profane and old-womanish tales, we should exercise unto godliness. Such exercise is like gymnastics. The words “unto godliness” mean with a view to godliness. Godliness is Christ lived out of us as the manifestation of God. This very Christ is today the Spirit dwelling in our spirit (2 Cor. 3:17; Rom. 8:9-10; 2 Tim. 4:22). Hence, to exercise ourselves unto godliness is to exercise our spirit to live Christ in our daily life.

In verse 7 Paul uses a Greek term referring to gymnastic exercise with respect to exercise unto godliness. We know from 3:16 that the mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh, is great. By our spirit with the indwelling Spirit we must exercise ourselves unto this goal, unto the expression of God.

In verse 8 Paul continues, “For bodily exercise is profitable for a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the present life and of the life which is coming.” The words “a little” denote a few things to a small extent of our being, in contrast with all things. “All things” refer not only to one part of our being, but to all parts—physical, psychological, and spiritual—both temporal and eternal. The promise of the present life which is in this age is like that in Matthew 6:33; John 16:33; Philippians 4:6-7; and 1 Peter 5:8-10. The promise of the coming life which is in the next age and in eternity is like that in 2 Peter 1:10-11; 2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 2:7, 17; 21:6-7. A promise like that in Mark 10:29-30 is both of the present life and of the coming life.

It is of crucial importance that we exercise unto godliness. Inwardly we need nourishment, and

outwardly, we should have godliness. From within we should be nourished with Christ, and then we should have a living which is the expression of God.

VII. A PATTERN TO THE BELIEVERS

In verse 10 Paul goes on to say, “For to this end we labor and strive, because we have set our hope on the living God, Who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.” Because our God is living, we can set our hope on Him.

In verse 12 Paul says to Timothy, “Let no one despise your youth, but be a pattern to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” Although Timothy was young, he was charged by the apostle to bear the responsibility of caring for the building up of a local church and appointing elders and deacons. For such a responsibility, he was charged not to be childish, but to be a pattern to the believers. He was to be an example in word, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity. He was to be pure, without mixture, in motive and act.

Verse 13 says, “Until I come, attend to reading, to exhortation, to teaching.” Here Paul does not refer to reading in the sense of study, but to reading aloud in public. According to the context, this kind of public reading may be for exhortation and teaching.

VIII. NOT NEGLECTING THE GIFT

Verse 14 continues, “Do not neglect the gift which is in you, which was given to you by means of prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the elders.” Here Paul speaks not of the gift which was upon Timothy, but of the gift which was in him. This was probably a teaching gift, according to the context of verses 11, 13, and 16. This may also be confirmed by 1 Timothy 1:3; 4:6; 5:7; 6:2, 12, 20; 2 Timothy 1:13-14; 2:2, 14-15, 24-25; 4:2, 5.

Paul’s word about the gift being “in you” indicates that the gift mentioned here is not an outward endowment, but the inward ability of life to minister to others. It is not a miraculous gift, such as speaking in tongues or healing (1 Cor. 12:28), but the gift of grace, such as teaching and exhorting (Rom. 12:7-8).

This gift was given by means of prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the elders. Laying on of hands has two functions: one for identification, as in Leviticus 1:4, and the other for impartation, as

here. Through the laying on of the hands of the elders and the Apostle Paul (2 Tim. 1:6), the gift of grace was imparted to Timothy.

Literally the Greek word for elders should be rendered presbytery, meaning the body of elders, the eldership. The elders, who are the overseers (3:2), represent a local church, which is the expression of the Body of Christ. The laying on of the hands of the elders signifies that the Body of Christ participated with God in imparting the gift of grace to Timothy. This was not a personal matter; it was a Body matter.