**Watch your life and doctrine closely** 23/8/24 dkm induction

Read: Nehemiah 8:1-12, 1Timothy 4

Text: 1Timothy 4:11-16

Psalms: 113, 141:1-5, 121

When filling out a form for the government I often find a question asking my profession. I scroll down the list and come to the end without finding a suitable answer. Sometimes I click ‘teacher’ because I am a teacher of religion, a teacher of the truth. Sometimes I find the category ‘minister of religion’. Once when applying for a visa for India I wrote, ‘preacher of the gospel’, and was promptly told I could not preach during my visit. If you apply for a visa for India, you will find a category called ‘missionary’, which I doubt has been ticked in the last fifty years!

Some church leaders call themselves ‘priest’ or ‘bishop’ or even ‘pope’. Many leaders of evangelical churches call themselves ‘pastor’, a biblical word also translated as shepherd’ (Eph 4:11). In Reformed churches the term ‘minister’ is frequently used, even though this confuses those making the list of professions to tick- ‘No. I am not the minister for finance or foreign affairs!’ The word minister translates the Greek ‘*diaconos*’, which refers to a servant or helper. Too many government ministers, and even church ministers, forget this! A minister is one who serves, serves God and serves the people. Jesus said he came to serve, not to be served (Mark 10:45). Paul urges Timothy to be a ‘good minister of Jesus Christ’ (4:6). There is no place in the church for men, or women, who want to lord it over others (Mark 10:42,43).

What does a minister in the church do? He ministers, or course, but what does ministry look like? The apostle tells us as he writes this, and a second, letter to Timothy, a young minister in the church at Ephesus around AD63. We read, ‘Give attention to public reading, to preaching/exhortation, and teaching’ (4:13). In 2Timothy 4:2 we read, ‘Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all long suffering and teaching’. Ministry is not just nine to five. It is not just a matter of sharing knowledge, even though knowledge of the Bible is essential. It is a matter of sharing one’s life. This is why Paul tells Timothy, ‘Watch your life and doctrine closely’ (4:16 NIV).

We have already heard the apostle telling Timothy how to deal with false teachers coming into the church, men teaching fables and genealogies, as well as ascetic practices. Timothy was told to nourish his mind and heart with good teaching, and to exercise or practice this teaching in godly living. As a minister of Jesus Christ, the Lord was with him so he could and must press on and not give up - ‘remain in Ephesus’ Paul said (1:3). Ministry, especially in a new congregation, can be stressful, but do not give up.

Timothy was young and rather timid (2Tim 1:7). Scholars suggest Timothy was in his mid-thirties; in that society a man was young until he was forty. But by being godly and giving attention to God’s word, to ‘the gift that is in you’, he would grow and be fruitful in his life and ministry.

**1.Godly character**

Youth is associated with immaturity and lack of wisdom. We cannot do anything about our age, but we can do something about wisdom. Wisdom comes from God: ‘But of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God’ (1Cor 1:30). James writes, ‘Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom’ (Ja 3:13). By demonstrating maturity beyond his age, Timothy could silence those critical of his youth.

Paul urges Timothy to be an example to fellow believers of any age by his outward conduct, conduct that flows from matters of the heart. Love is at the centre of five ways in which Timothy can be an example to others (4:12). Love is at the centre of the life of every believer. If we do not love we do not know God for, ‘God is love’ (1John4:8). Believers love God and love one another. Love is the mark of a believer (John 13:35). God loves us as a father loves his children. He encourages us when we do right and corrects us when we do wrong. Timothy, like Paul, must correct false teaching in the church. He had the apostle’s authority, but he needed to exercise this authority with wisdom by firstly, setting an example and secondly, by faithful teaching of the truth.

People know us by what they see and what they hear. ‘Lord, set a guard over my mouth; keep a watch over the door of my lips’ David sang (Ps 141:3). Paul advised the same. A minister must be careful in what he says. A missionary lady once swore at me, and I have heard church leaders use bad language. I recall driving with a fellow minister who angrily blamed the driver for taking the wrong turn even when the minister had given directions! How does the minister react when things go wrong? How does he speak to his wife and children?

Some get a bad reputation without using foul language. We all get defensive when people criticise us, and it is easy to lash out at such times. Like the politician getting poor service in a restaurant, the minister may respond, ‘Don’t you know who I am?’ or ‘How dare you question me and my ministry!’ Paul later writes, ‘A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition’ (2Tim 2:24,25). Ministers talk a lot but must be ready to listen, even to criticism. Minsters who counsel members of the church are in a position to gossip; some even slander. Every believer, especially a minister, should let his ‘yes’ be ‘yes, and his ‘no’, no’. When exhorting or correcting he should do so with words of Scripture. ‘It is written’ is how Jesus answered Satan.

While words are heard, and can be remembered for a long time, other aspects of a man’s conduct are observable by others. People see where you go and what you do. Ministers who love the bottle, gambling, or viewing pornography, are not setting an example of godly conduct. Paul refers to ‘purity’ here and in 5:2, where the context is of sexual purity. Integrity and purity matter if the minister is to be an example of godliness to the flock. ‘Ministers must practice what they preach if they are to see what they preach practiced’ (Milne).

Observable conduct is the outcome of what is in one’s heart. What does society do when someone is acting badly? The magistrate examines the person’s background and orders a psychological examination. Our behaviour reflects what is in our mind and heart, our likes and dislikes, our pride and our fears. Timothy was young and maybe timid. But Paul told him that God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power, of love, and of a sound mind (2Tim 1:7). Look at David facing Goliath; he fought in the name of God and in God’s strength.

Timothy was a man of faith. Trust in God must motivate and direct his life. Faith must lead to faithfulness. Knowledge of Scripture, along with love for God, and love for other people, will lead to purity and morality. When a minister fails to lead by example in speech and in conduct, his moral and spiritual authority will be diminished. He can preach with great vigour, but his words will ring hollow.

**2.Give attention**

Paul reassures Timothy of his intention to return to Ephesus (4:13); he did this in the previous chapter (3:14). Timothy surely found comfort in Paul’s promise to return. In the meantime, Paul was writing and praying for him, giving instructions about worship. Focus on the means of grace is the best way to answer critics and false teachers. Athletes answer their critics with gold medals! Ministers or athletes who let critics get to them will lose focus on the goal. ‘Preach the word’ says Paul the apostle (2Tim 4:2).

Too many ministers are distracted from their primary task of preaching and teaching the word of God. Some get distracted by lots of meetings. They may be church meetings and may be considered necessary, but they can be detrimental to proper preparation and preaching of the word. Some ministers get involved in managing schools or other church ministries, again worthy tasks but tasks that leave less time for his primary ministry of preaching and teaching the word of God.

The apostle urges Timothy to give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching (4:13). In the previous two chapters Paul gave directions for public worship and order in the church. He urged prayer for all men, public prayer (2:1). In synagogue worship portions of Scripture were read and explained, a practice which continued in the NT church (Acts 13:15). In addition to the OT, churches had letters from the apostles that were read in church meetings (1Thess 5:27). We now have the gospels and these letters, along with the OT.

Reading in public is different to private reading. Our grandson is giving speeches in grade 2 at school. I was telling him to speak louder and more clearly when in front of the class. He will also learn to follow punctuation and give the correct intonation. I was listening to an analysis of the famous ‘I have a dream speech’ by Martin Luther King. In the Bible we have words, but these are not always read well in public. Most churches have different people read the Bible, but this can be distracting if the person is a poor reader. Some churches read very little of the Bible, preferring to listen to the band or the minister tell stories.

If Bible reading is being abandoned so is the sermon. Again, it is the music that takes centre stage in worship- literally! Yet Paul does not even mention singing as he tells Timothy what he should focus on; we know that singing of the psalms was part of worship in the NT church. But a minister like Timothy must be ready to explain or exposit the word that is read. When Nehemiah reformed worship in Israel after the Exile, he had Ezra the scribe read the Bible from morning to midday. He and the Levites, ‘Read distinctly from the book, and the Law of God, and they gave the sense and helped them understand the reading’ (Neh 8:8). This is expository preaching. Some ministers let politics, a holiday, or a movie become the focus of their sermon. It is false teachers who preach what itching ears want to hear.

Doctrine or teaching comes in a systematic summary of Scripture. Most churches draw out from the Bible a summary of doctrine. In Ephesus we have something like this in the ‘creed’ at the end of the previous chapter. We have a catechism and a confession from which we teach children and adults respectively.

**3.Gift in you**

Every believer receives the Spirit of God and is given a spiritual gift. Some are given the gift of ‘evangelist, and some pastors, and teachers’ (Eph 4:4). Having a gift is not the same as being elected and appointed as an office-bearer, but the man appointed as minister or pastor must have the requisite gift. Paul identified Timothy as a committed young believer and took him along as a fellow missionary. He refers to laying ‘my hands’ on Timothy (2Tim 1:6), and here in verse 14 to ‘the laying on of the hands of the eldership’. We presume this was one time, but we do not know when. Was it a session or a presbytery that did this? Paul also refers to words of ‘prophecy’ at this time (4:14, 1:18).

Before I was ordained as a minister, I was set apart as a missionary in what was called a ‘commissioning service’. Our first year in India was tough, but I remembered this commissioning, and the prayers said for us with the laying on of hands. Paul urged Timothy to renew the gift given to him at his ordination and ‘fan into flame the gift of God’ (2Tim 1:6 NIV). The spiritual gift we have is like a seed that needs cultivating and nourishing in order to grow and bear fruit to the glory of God. Or we could say, ‘Use it or lose it’. Are you using the gift God has given you?

**4.Grow and be fruitful**

Having told Timothy to be an example to others in speech and in conduct, to focus on faithful preaching and teaching, and to remember his God-given gift, the apostle now tells Timothy to meditate on these things (4:15). He must not get distracted from the ministry to which he was ordained, not even by things that are good and necessary. The apostles did not allow themselves to be distracted by serving tables; they asked for deacons to be chosen and appointed, with prayer and the laying on of hands (Acts 6:6). This is not exactly what Paul tells Timothy, but did he sense that Timothy was getting stressed and about to give up?

Timothy was to give himself entirely to the ministry of the word (4:15). He was to immerse himself in the Scriptures. A preacher must preach to himself as well as his people lest he become disqualified (1Cor 9:27). Joel Beeke’s book, ‘Reformed Preaching’ is subtitled, ‘Proclaiming God’s word from the heart of the preacher to the heart of his people’. I cannot control your heart, but I can control my own heart, my own meditation, my own speech, and my own conduct. In the words of the apostle, the minister must take heed to himself and to the doctrine, and he must keep doing this day in and day out (4:16).

In this way he will grow personally, grow up into Christ who is the head (Eph 4:15). Such a man will see fruit in his own life and in the lives of others, fruit to the glory of God; compare the rewards promised deacons in 3:13. The word ‘save’ in verse 16 is used in the sense of sanctification rather than justification, which is by grace alone. Sanctification is also a work of God’s free grace, but it also involves us working out our own salvation (Phil 2:12) as we focus on our wonderful Saviour, on the cross and his resurrection, and on his coming return in glory.