

Beyond the Temple Walls to a Greater Responsibility

1 Timothy 4:1-16

¹ The Spirit clearly says that, in later times, some will fall away from the faith, because they devote themselves to deceitful spirits and the doctrines of demons, ² in connection with the hypocrisy of liars, whose own consciences have been seared. ³ They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴ In fact, everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ because it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. ⁶ If you point out these things to the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished by the words of the faith and the good doctrine, which you have followed faithfully. ⁷ Pay no attention to worldly and absurd myths, but train yourself for godliness. ⁸ For bodily training is beneficial to an extent, but godliness is beneficial in all things, because it holds promise both for life now and for the life to come. ⁹ This saying is trustworthy and worthy of all acceptance. ¹⁰ Indeed, it is for this reason that we work hard and are insulted: because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. ¹¹ Insist on these things and continue teaching them. ¹² Let no one look down on your youth. Instead, be an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity. ¹³ Until I come, devote yourself to the reading of Scripture, to encouraging, and to teaching. ¹⁴ Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy when the elders laid their hands on you. ¹⁵ Practice these things. Constantly be involved in them, so that everyone may see your progress. ¹⁶ Pay close attention to yourself and to the doctrine. Persevere in them, because by doing this you will save both yourself and those who listen to you.

Numerous studies have documented the utter collapse of institutional Christianity in America. For example, the Pew Research Center has modeled how the percentage of Americans who say they are Christian will go from 90% in 1970 to possibly as low as 35% by 2070. Younger generations are leading the way in leaving religion behind.

This might surprise you, but on many levels, they're right. If Christianity simply means that we only care about having your name on a membership list, that you show up to a building a couple times a year so your parents stop nagging you, that you go through the motions of following all the rules this church has had since the 1950s, that you give outward assent to a bunch of dry doctrines that do not breathe life into the practice of a living church, that you should care about what is on a shelf in the church library and not about what the church is doing out in the community, then who would blame anyone for not wanting anything to do with that. So maybe before we lament the collapse of the institutional church in America, we should go back and see what it really means to be part of a church in the first place.

That's why we're beginning this series on the concept of the temple. That's why we're taking a close look at today's Second Reading. The apostle Paul is passing on the reins of ministry to a younger generation, to his protégé Timothy. He is giving greater vision for what Timothy's life and responsibility in the church can be. So many centuries later, God is still giving us the same call to a greater vision for what our life and responsibility in the church can be.

We're living through a time of unprecedented change in the history of the American church. But when you think about it, it's not all that unprecedented. The apostle Paul apparently

received a special revelation from the Holy Spirit that predicted a large-scale apostasy in the last days: *The Spirit clearly says that, in later times, some will fall away from the faith, because they devote themselves to deceitful spirits and the doctrines of demons.* What would that look like? Drove and drove of people would abandon their parents' faith and stop coming. They would give up any relationship with the church and instead turn their attention to what they're hearing out in society. They would care more about the voices they hear outside the church than about the voices they hear inside the church. Those voices sound so good, but underneath them are hiding spiritual deception and a callous conscience that just doesn't care about what anyone else says and is ready to do the exact opposite of what God says in his Word. Does any of this sound familiar? Although we have shifted from the extreme of legalistic restrictions in Paul's day—restricting food and marriage, for example—to the opposite extreme of a hands off approach in our day—I can live however I want, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else—these words sound so prophetic to us two thousand years later. Though we're fighting different battles, it's still so true: Some will abandon the faith. So what's our response? Our response should not be, "Oh, young people are ruining the church these days! If they hadn't left, our church would still be so full! But now our church might close!" Our response needs to double down or recommit on what it really means to be part of the church.

What was Timothy's response in all this supposed to be? As a minister of Christ Jesus, he was to teach the truths of the faith and follow the truths of the faith. What follows are seven specific ways to carry out that responsibility. Quite significantly, they shift back and forth between doctrine and practice. First, do the hard work of spiritual training. *Train yourself for godliness.* Second, continue the responsibility of spiritual education. *Insist on these things and continue teaching them.* Third, live and exemplary life, even if Timothy was apparently in his early 30s. *Let no one look down on your youth. Instead, be an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.* Fourth, focus on the core activities of public worship. *Devote yourself to the reading of Scripture, to encouraging, and to teaching.* Fifth, use your gifts. *Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy when the elders laid their hands on you.* Sixth, be fully committed. *Practice these things. Constantly be involved in them, so that everyone may see your progress. Practice these things. Constantly be involved in them, so that everyone may see your progress.* Finally, pay attention to both doctrine and practice. *Pay close attention to yourself and to the doctrine.* It's all about talking the talk and walking the walk—you can't have one without the other.

In an article entitled, "My Pastor Knows My Name," Dan Borvan spoke about his experience with the church. When he attended megachurches in the past, the senior pastors did not know his name. Nobody noticed if he was at church or not. In fact, nobody noticed when he moved and left the area completely. He explained, "Our relationship went about as deep as the relationship that I had with my local barista. I did not tell my barista that I was moving, why tell my pastor?" Now he's quick to explain he didn't blame his pastor for that; it's just the reality when there are several thousand people in one church. And that article is over ten years old. Since then, this trend has only accelerated. Now so many view the church like a coffee shop.

Now here's the important question: How do you feel about people like that? How do you feel about those who conceive of the church as little different from Starbucks? How do you feel about those who claim that if they don't have to tell their barista they're leaving for

another coffee shop, they don't have to tell anyone at their church they're leaving for something else? How do you feel about those who believe a church membership means that they can worship there as little or as much as they want? Do you just throw up your hands and say, "It's not worth any extra time or effort. It doesn't matter what I say or do. Time to just give up on them. They're probably a lost cause! Let's focus on our own people!" Or do you love them as much as Jesus does?

With the collapse of institutional Christianity and the concept of church membership rapidly changing, is our ministry still worth it? Definitely! Why? Because Jesus has saved every single person in this world. It's that simple. Jesus saved the world. He saved you. He forgave you for all the times you've quit on your neighbor because it's too hard and too uncomfortable. Jesus' undying love for this entire world makes it all worth it. As Paul says, *"Indeed, it is for this reason that we work hard and are insulted: because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people."* Now think about that. Your children who say, "I'm done with church! You can't force me to go anymore. Jesus is their Savior too, and he died for them too. The skeptical college students who get the impression churches care more about dead theologians than the living, breathing people in their communities who are trying to figure out their gender identity and spiritual views—Jesus is their Savior too, and he died for them too. The young people in this church who have gone to catechism and church for years but are too scared to voice their doubts because they're just going to be told they should've been paying more attention—Jesus is their Savior too, and he died for them too. That's why all this effort is worth it! It's worth it because we're talking about people—people whom Jesus loves, people whom Jesus saved, and people from whom Jesus died. It's worth it because church isn't a building or an institution. It's a network of relationships with people that is formed by the love of God shown in Christ.

So it's time for us to recommit on what it means to be members of a church. According to 1 Timothy 4, it's about talking the talk and walking the walk. You cannot neglect doctrine to focus on practice. And you cannot neglect practice to focus on doctrine. Church membership is far more than attending church an hour a week—or a few times a year. Granted, worship is the heart and core of what we do. There's a reason Paul told Timothy to devote himself to preaching and teaching. It's how we reach the most amount of people at one time. But it can never be only that. As we'll see throughout this series, it's not about a church but a temple—and that means it extends beyond these four walls. It means reaching out to a struggling friend and serving the community. Teaching is simply something we say but something we do. So we teach younger generations how to watch out for deceptive religious teachers and how to interact with people of different beliefs with warm graciousness and humility no person could ever criticize. So we bring up the next generation in the truths of the faith.

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