

The Ten Commandments of Pastors (1)

If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.

⁷ But reject profane and old wives' fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness.

⁸ For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come. ⁹ This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance. ¹⁰ For to this *end* we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is *the* Savior of all men, especially of those who believe. ¹¹ These things command and teach. ¹² (1 Timothy 4:6–11)

A survey conducted in the U.S. among 5000 pastors found that during the Covid pandemic, around 40% were considering leaving the ministry altogether. I don't know what that translated to in terms of actual resignations, but I do know of many churches without pastors, pastors that left, resigned, or went somewhere else during the pandemic. I'm sure the reasons for thinking about or actually resigning were as diverse as all the men and their churches. But one of the common themes you hear is when men become deeply frustrated that they could not meet everyone's expectations. That it was impossible to please everyone.

And that is not something that was true only of Covid, in many ways it goes with modern ministry.

D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge say this of what is often expected of a modern pastor:

“The modern pastor is expected to be a preacher, counselor, administrator, PR guru, fund-raiser and hand-holder. Depending upon the size of the church he serves, he may have to be an expert on youth, something of an accountant, janitor, evangelist, small groups expert, and excellent chair of committees, a team player and a transparent leader.”

Today, pastors are supposed to be everything from CEOs to celebrities to comedians to consultants.

In fact, not understanding what a pastor's priorities should be is what causes many a pastor to feel frustrated by being pulled in a thousand directions, and it makes many a church member feel frustrated with what they think is their pastor's failure to do his job. So what is his job? What should his priorities be?

The rest of chapter four is where Paul turns his attention to Timothy personally. Whereas chapter 1, 2, 3, and 5 have to do with how to order the church, here Paul focuses on how Timothy must order his own life as a pastor, what he needs to focus on, and emphasise. You could call these the ten commandments for pastors, because there are roughly ten imperatives here, depending on how you group them.

Hearing Paul speak like this to Timothy is like hearing a general's orders being relayed to the field commander. You're hearing one leader address another about what needs to happen, and that tells you a lot about what is important. Musicians and music teachers will sometimes attend what's called a masterclass, where a top, world-class musician teaches the teachers in advanced techniques.

What you're about to see in 1 Timothy 4 is a masterclass for pastors from the apostle to Timothy.

This is a general speaking to a captain on the field. But this is not a conversation between two people with no relevance for you. You are hearing the marching orders for the church, for you. You are hearing what is important in your own Christian life. You are hearing what your own leaders in this church should be pursuing, and what church life should seem like and be built upon. These Ten Commandments for Pastors translate into principles for every Christian.

Commandment 1: Know and Teach Sound Doctrine

If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.

¹¹ These things command and teach.

Commandment one is teach sound doctrine. A good pastor is a good teacher of necessary truth. He holds and teaches sound doctrine. “Paul keeps repeating himself on this point!” Yes, he does, doesn't he? We tend to repeat those things we regard as essential. First and foremost, a pastor like Timothy, is the custodian of doctrine: learning it, understanding it, and communicating it.

Paul actually gives three different ways Timothy will teach this sound doctrine. At the beginning of verse 6, he uses the word *instruct*. This is a very gentle word which means to point out, lay it out, make it known, set before people. A lot of teaching is not pulpit-pounding, thundering warnings. A lot of it simply showing, explaining, making known the whole counsel of God in Scripture.

But then in verse 11, there are two more words. The word for *teach* is just the normal word for teach, to instruct, tell. The other word is the forceful word for give orders, direct, command, to use authority to give instructions. So a faithful shepherd's teaching is not all of one tone. Sometimes it is very meek, pointing to what must be known, but ranges all the way to a commanding officer giving orders.

Sometimes pastors think they need to construct a pulpit personality. Someone tells them they need to be Mr. Motivational, or Mr. Stand-up Comedy, or Mr. Hard-Driving Salesman, or Mr. Finger-Shaking Warning, or Mr Nice Guy, Mr. Empathetic Best Friend or Mr. Incomprehensibly Intelligent. And ever after, every sermon comes out sounding like that brand, that image. There is now just one string on their banjo, one setting programmed in, one favourite.

But Paul didn't tell Timothy to construct an image or build a brand. Pastors are not brands. In fact, one fellow in the US began an Instagram account called PreachersNSneakers, where he started to catalogue celebrity preachers who would wear \$5000 sneakers, \$3600 Gucci jackets and more. There is now a whole culture of celebrity pastors who think the goal of ministry is to create your brand with thousands of dollars of image engineering.

That's not what Paul says here. Paul says teach the way the truth demands to be taught. The nature of the truth determines the tone of the preaching. Some parts of the Bible are just very interesting, and they don't need to be turned into threats and warnings. Some parts of the Bible are threats and warnings, and they don't need to be downplayed into encouraging chicken soup for the soul. A pastor doesn't have the luxury of trying to construct a personality for himself. He is a servant of the Word. When the Word is encouraging, so he must be, when it is challenging, so he must be. When people complain because a pastor was too gentle, or too harsh, or too dogmatic, or too irenic, the question to ask is, was that what the tone of the passage of Scripture was? Is he always of that tone, or did the text demand it?

But to obey this commandment, the man must be not making stuff up, but must be deeply rooted in Scriptural doctrine. Look at how Timothy will be able to instruct the brethren, in the last phrase of verse 6.

nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.

Nourished, literally reared up, trained up in, the words of faith and the good doctrine. Bible teaching has been Timothy's milk and meat for years. He has been taking in Christian doctrine, chewing on it, thinking it through, reasoning it out, systematising it, analysing it, categorising it, prioritising it. The faithful preacher must have a long and familiar relationship with the Bible.

Look at the last few words of verse 6: “which you have carefully followed”. That means *pay attention to in minute detail*, to follow closely. Timothy had made a careful study of the words of faith and of good doctrine. He was a competent and thoughtful theologian.

Now if church-growth specialists had been on the scene in Ephesus, they would have told Timothy, “You’re studying the wrong thing, Timothy. You need to study the culture of the Ephesians. Study the trends, the things that are popular. Preach a sermon series on hot topics in Ephesus, ‘Redeeming Silver Figurines of Diana For Jesus’. You need to improve your drip, Timothy, get some swag to attract the younger crowds.”

Paul says, Timothy, you have made the right thing your study. You have immersed yourself in the Word. If you want a healthy church, you should want your pastor to be a Bible nerd to the nth degree. You should want him to study and read for hours, and hunt down truth and prepare it and present a good meal every Sunday or Wednesday.

Commandment 2: Keep the Main Things The Main Things

⁷ But reject profane and old wives’ fables,

Timothy, and every pastor reading 1 Timothy, reject, avoid, have nothing to do with profane and old-wives fables. Fables means stories or accounts that are dubious, doubtful in their truthfulness. Profane and old wives means these stories are worldly, trivial, ordinary, pointless, worthless, irreverent and they are gossipy, superstitious, unfounded, conspiratorial.

Remember how often Paul says this?

nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith. (1 Timothy 1:4)

1Ti 6:20 O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge -

But shun profane *and* idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. (2 Timothy 2:16)

But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. (2 Timothy 2:23)

not giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn from the truth. (Titus 1:14)

Timothy, don’t get sidetracked into teaching or answering or debating false theories, speculative nonsense, wild notions. There will be an endless supply of half-baked notions, conspiracy theories, esoteric ideas. If you engage with that stuff, Satan will tempt you into a maze of foolish, petty controversy, and you will lose the effectiveness of your ministry. You will sink to the level of the foolishness you choose to engage with, you will become as trivial and silly as the ridiculous theories you choose to countenance. You will give credence to what ought to be ignored and dismissed.

Nonsense doesn’t deserve the attention of the Christian pulpit. Life is too short, sin too dire, our Saviour’s sacrifice on the cross too precious, the hour too late, for Christian preachers to chase down all the rabbit-trails Satan, the world, and the culture lays down for us.

What are these rabbit-trails? For Timothy, it was the superstitions and fables often taught by both Judaism and the pagan religions of the day. The pulpit was not a place to take those on. For us, it is a far greater deluge of possible rabbit trails.

Conspiracy, controversy and contemporary fads.

A pastor could take on the conspiracy theories of assassinations, deaths and disappearances of politicians or celebrities, or the truth behind 9/11, or UFOS, Alien abductions and Area 51, suppressed technologies, secret weapons, agendas to control the world, vaccination and anti-vaccination, secret societies control the world, that the Moon landings were faked, the Earth is flat, or the elite are actually Reptilians in human disguise.

He could take on the most controversial and argued-upon points of Christian doctrine and preach them every week: which Bible version is best? Is Calvinism or Arminianism correct? Is it a pre-, mid-, or post-tribulation rapture? Now those are important matters, and I have dealt with them in our ministry here, and will do so again. But controversy is not what you make the diet of a church, just like you can't eat chillies, for breakfast, lunch, and supper.

He could also jump on the “relevance” bus. That is, whatever the world decides is “relevant” is what he will preach on. So if it decides the topic of the moment is global warming, he's on it. Or the wealth gap between the 1% and the rest. Or gender dysphoria. Or white privilege. Or the wage gap between men and women. Or Islamophobia. Or being the best you. Or bringing out the tiger in you. But all of this is letting the world set the agenda for the church. It is letting the interests and concerns and curiosities of the ungodly become the concerns to God's people when they gather. Now because these things affect us one way or the other, we do need to touch on them at certain points, and we do. But we do not let the tail of the the culture wag the dog of the Christian pulpit.

Timothy, keep the main thing the main thing. So what ingredients then go into a healthy sermon and teaching diet?

First, plenty of the doctrine of God. Who this God is, His attributes, what He is like, and not like, what His revealed will is, how He works, how He should be worshipped, this is utterly foundational. We preach the living God.

Second, plenty of the doctrine of Christ. Who Jesus is, His nature, how God prophesied and set that redemption up from Abraham all the way through to the NT, His earthly work, the meaning of the cross and resurrection, His priestly work for us now and His future return, rapturing His church, the millennial kingdom. ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, (1 Corinthians 1:23)

Thirdly, plenty of the doctrine of salvation. The meaning of repentance and faith, what it is to be saved, the fruits we should expect, the nature of true assurance and false. The meaning of sin, as well as our own nature as humans, with our mind and affections and habits. What it means to be “in Christ”, all the privileges and blessings of that position, and how you live out the gospel in your life.

Fourth, plenty of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the Christian life. The Person and work of the Third Person of the Trinity is central to the life of growing, Christlike, holiness. How the Christian life works, how we become more like Christ as we co-operate with the Spirit. The spiritual disciplines, the habits, the devotional life.

Fifth, plenty of the doctrine of the church. We saw the church is the house of God, the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. This is where you worship God, grow, serve, launch out to evangelise, make disciples, partake of the Lord's Supper. The church is fundamental to your life and worship.

Sixth, plenty of the doctrine of Scripture. What the Bible is, how to read it, how to understand its parts, how to understand the whole, how to apply it to all of life.

Now those are the main things. The best way to deal with those main things is to work through Scripture verse-by-verse, supplemented by topical series, and by a regular discipleship hour or studies in the church. Now if you do that, you'll find there just isn't time to chase down the rabbit trails of conspiracies and controversies and contemporary fixations.

And it also explains why a faithful pulpit is not going to sound like your Youtube recommended list, or like the screaming headlines of the news sites, or the discernment ministries. It is going to be a steady diet of God, Christ, the Spirit, man, sin, salvation, sanctification, the church, Scripture, discernment.

Commandment 3: Develop Disciplined Devotion

and exercise yourself toward godliness.

Exercise is the Greek word *gumnazo*. We derived our English word gymnasium and gym from this word, which referred to athletes exercising, training for competition. Now we all know the connotations of athletic training. It is repetitive, so as to condition the body. It is rigorous so as to improve and get fit. It is deliberate, so as to target the muscles or the skills needed to do well. When we train our bodies, we apply this kind of deliberate, difficult, repetition of exercise habits.

Now Paul says, the faithful pastor does this with his godliness. Godliness is word the captures the ideas of personal holiness and purity, as well as the heart of devotion and piety. It is a life of holy worship, of love for God.

He doesn't say, Timothy, find a secluded place and wait for godliness to come upon you. He doesn't say, Timothy, go to church and hopefully the godliness of others will rub off on you. No, train yourself for godliness. That is, impose on yourself the disciplines, structures, routines needed to provide godliness. Just like your fitness routine has a certain time set aside, a certain place, certain exercises, certain routines, certain diets, so treat your godliness with the same planning and purpose and precision.

Set in place a habit of meditating on Scripture. Set in place a habit of praying. Set in place a habit of memorising Scripture. Set in place a habit of reading books that grow you in your faith. Set in place a habit of sharing the Word with someone. Set in place a habit of reaching out to another believer to edify and strengthen. Set in place the habit of regular attendance, service, in your local church. Create the routines. Set some targets. Watch to see how you are doing. The habits do not make you godly; it is the Holy Spirit who does that. But the habits provides the structure and the atmosphere for the growth to come. They are gym in which fitness will come, they are the treadmill, and the weight bench and the pool in which your spiritual heart and muscles are trained.

Paul explains why. ⁸ For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.

Because bodily training profits a bit, but godliness profits much. The promise of godliness is better. When you train physically, there is a promise that motivates you to begin, and to stick with it. Maybe the promise is that you will feel better. Maybe the promise is that you will look better. Maybe the promise is you get to eat more. Maybe the promise is that you will live longer. But godliness holds out a twofold promise: it will benefit you in this life, and benefit you in the life to come. It changes the way you live now, and it will last forever. From an investment point of view, physical fitness is a short-term investment. Not bad, but not great. Godliness will make you like Christ which will be a wiser life, a purer life, a more joyful life, and it will be a life with eternal significance.

So which are you focused on? I wonder what would happen to some Christian's lives if we took just half of the the time they devote to physical fitness and applied it to seeking God in godliness. Just 50% of the time they spend running, crossfit, swimming, walking, weightlifting, pilates, squash. Take those hours in a week, halve it, and put it into reading, meditating, memorising the Word, praying for others, sharing the Word with other Christians, being in church, reading Christian books, thoughtfully considering their own godliness. For some, it would revolutionise their walk with God, simply because of the consistency.

But a pastor must of all Christians be disciplined in his Christianity. The Christian life is a life of order, discipline, well-shaped living. And the one teaching the Christian life cannot be chronically ill-disciplined, or he will not experience godliness. He must structure his life, his routines, and habits, so that godliness is possible. In fact, he is to labour and suffer for the sake of ministry, as Paul goes on to say.

⁹ This *is* a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance. ¹⁰ For to this *end* we both labor and suffer reproach,

The discipline of a pastor extends to exhausting toil, enduring opposition.

In the end, we are not aiming for exceptional feats of godliness, just small, regularly repeated acts. A world-class violinist once said about practising: if I skip one day, I know it. If I skip two days, the conductor knows it. If I skip three days, the whole world knows it. For Christian leaders, it is probably something very similar. One day- I know it. Two days – my wife and children know it. Three days, and my church will know it.

Why? Do we discipline ourselves this way? ⁹ For to this *end* we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is *the* Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.

Because there is a living reality behind it all: the living God. It is worth the time commitment of study, of prayer, of discipleship, of training others, because He is alive and He is the Saviour, committed to saving people from their sin and misery and destruction.

That's worth getting up for, being a little more disciplined in time management, or sleep, forgoing some other trivial entertainment to fit in a spiritual habit. He is the living God and the loving Saviour.

A pastor does not need to be a CEO, an actor, a brand, a Youtube sensation, a politician, a therapist, or a motivational speaker in order to be pleasing to God. His job description is not the moving target of the world's fashions and whims. If he just began with three of the pastor's ten commandments, he'd already be a faithful man: teach sound doctrine, keep the main things the main things, and discipline yourself in godliness. And whatever the season, the crisis, he can find the job satisfaction of being faithful in these simple areas.