

Lesson 5 | June 30, 2024

Spiritual Practices for Christian Leaders

Study Text: 1 Timothy 4:7–8,15–16; 2 Timothy 2:19–26; 3:13–17

Central Truth: Christian leaders must live as a holy example to all.

Key Verse: 1 Timothy 4:16

Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt save both thyself, and them that hear thee (KJV).

Keep a close watch on how you live and on your teaching. Stay true to what is right for the sake of your own salvation and the salvation of those who hear you (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will reflect on the characteristics of exemplary Christian leadership.
- Students will value biblical preaching and teaching.
- Students will set goals for training in godliness.

Introducing the Study

Say: The Scriptures we'll be exploring today encourage us to think about the example we set for others. If spiritual practices for Christian leaders are intended to set a holy example to all, then these are matters important for us all. Let's begin by getting our imaginations warmed up.

Opening Activity—Athletic Training

Ask. *What kinds of training do athletes (professional or amateur) engage in?* Find an example online of a typical training schedule for an Olympic athlete. Share the example with the class.

Say: Most of us aren't professional athletes, but there is a kind of spiritual training we all need to practice to strengthen our relationship with God and fulfill His purpose. Like athletic training, our spiritual training requires emotional, spiritual, and even physical energy. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Today's passages will inspire us toward godly living, lifelong growth in God's Word, and interpersonal ministry. These urgent truths transcend time and place, and we will hear Paul's challenge to Timothy addressing us today. Perhaps Paul was drawing upon the Psalmist's words from many centuries earlier: "How can a young person stay pure? By obeying your word . . . I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:9,11, NLT).

Part 1—Keep Yourself Pure

Train for Godliness

1 Timothy 4:7–8

Say: Earlier in this unit we saw that false teachers were plaguing the church at Ephesus. They were very interested in myths and speculative arguments about origins. Timothy, by contrast, was to have nothing to do with such godless pursuits; rather, he must be training for godliness. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

“Godless ideas and old wives’ tales” (1 Timothy 4:7, NLT) were Paul’s evaluation of the false teachings in that age of deception. We are familiar with the phrase “old wives’ tales.” Even in Paul’s day it was a common derogatory phrase used to denounce something as inaccurate and untrue. Like Timothy was taught, church leaders today should not waste time on such meaningless discussions.

Paul prescribed a much better use of our energies: “Exercise thyself rather unto godliness” (KJV). The imagery is of athletes, whom Paul described as being “disciplined in their training . . . to win a prize” (1 Corinthians 9:25, NLT). Using the athletic image to describe applying oneself to being godly, Paul said physical training “profiteth little” (1 Timothy 4:8, KJV) although it “is good” (NLT). It has some value, but by comparison, training for godliness is much more valuable. Paul had told the Corinthians, who were familiar with athletic competitions on the scale of the Olympics, “They do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible” (1 Corinthians 9:25, KJV). Much more is at stake in spiritual exercise than physical. Godliness promises “benefits in this life and in the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:8, NLT).

What does “training for godliness” mean? Athletes exercise self-control in saying no to what harms, hinders, or does not help their ability to compete. They also devote many hours to practicing proper form, strengthening key muscles, and acquiring the endurance they need. Similarly, Christians who want to grow in godliness must avoid some activities and devote themselves to others. Athletes constantly make every effort to grow in their grasp of the sport: reading, studying, watching game film, learning from past performances, and seeking to exceed prior accomplishments. What would happen if we gave such attention to our walk with the Lord?

Discuss

? For any athletes or former athletes in the room, what can you tell us about the physical training that athletic excellence demands?

? What can we learn from this athletic imagery to train for godliness? What activities should we avoid and to what activities should we devote ourselves?

Turn from Evil

2 Timothy 2:19–21

Say: Picking up on the need to say no to certain things while we're training for godliness, let's take a look at Paul's command to keep ourselves pure. It's important to remember that personal purity for its own sake is not our ultimate goal. Instead, the purpose of our sanctification is to be "ready for the Master to use for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:21, NLT). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Paul had just concluded a strong warning against faith-destroying false teaching and its proponents, calling out two of them by name (see 2 Timothy 2:17–18). He had painted a bleak picture, likening the spread of this teaching throughout the church to the spread of gangrene throughout the body. But with a word of contrast—"nevertheless" (verse 18, KJV)—he reminded Timothy of the sure foundation of God's truth that prevails despite any discouraging outlook.

The image is of a sturdy structure relying on a well-placed foundation stone, sealed with two ringing inscriptions. The first describes God's sovereign affirmation of His people: "The Lord knows those who are his" (verse 19, NLT). This is a quotation from Numbers 16:5, during a tumultuous time when Korah led a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, but God acted on behalf of His true servants.

The second inscription states, "All who belong to the Lord must turn away from evil" (2 Timothy 2:19, NLT; see Leviticus 24:16, Isaiah 52:11, Psalms 34:14, Proverbs 3:7). The wording makes it clear that the evil we must avoid includes wicked actions or the quality of wickedness, not people.

Finally, Paul illustrated the contrast between those who keep themselves pure and those who do not by likening them to honorable and dishonorable "vessels" (KJV) or "utensils" (NLT) in a household. Paul's readers could easily grasp this difference, leading them to aspire to be honorable instruments the Master would use for noble purposes. All Christians, especially leaders, need to be open to the sanctifying and purifying work of God's Holy Spirit—turning away from sin and keeping themselves pure for the Master's use.

Resource Packet Item 1: Avoid Evil

Distribute the worksheet and read the passage together. Then discuss its relevance to the Scripture passages used in today's lesson.

Discuss

? "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Timothy 2:19, NLT). How does this assurance make you feel? Does this "inscription" seal the foundation of your life? How can you walk more confidently in this truth?

? What disciplines, practices, or habits have you found helpful in keeping yourself pure? How does purity prepare one to be used by God?

Part 2—Commit to Study and Doctrine Be a Lifelong Learner

1 Timothy 4:15–16

Say: When we accomplish a goal, it's so rewarding to put our feet up and rest on our laurels. But Paul challenged Timothy not to have this kind of mentality when it comes to Scripture. Our study of God's Word can never exhaust its riches, so we should be diligent, lifelong learners. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In 1 Timothy 4:13–14, Paul had encouraged Timothy to keep publicly reading Scripture, exercising his spiritual gift in preaching and teaching. He followed that with additional emphasis on the importance of sustained devotion to these matters.

Then Paul told him, "Meditate upon" (verse 15, KJV) or "Give your complete attention to" (NLT) these things. In Timothy's day, but even more so in ours, many distractions dilute our focus. The study, prayer, and meditation required to bring God's message to people are not as visible as other tasks and might easily be neglected. Yet they must take priority. They are fundamental for every believer as we share the gospel with the world.

Such preparation will pay off: "Everyone will see your progress" if you "throw yourself into" those tasks (verse 15, NLT). The goal is not personal recognition as a great preacher or teacher. Jesus said the hypocrites who strive for such accolades may receive that reward, but they forfeit God's reward which is so much better (Matthew 6:1–21). No, the goal is salvation for oneself and others! Those who are called to, charged with, and anointed by the Spirit for preaching and teaching have an enormous responsibility to guard their lives and their teaching. But all of us must continually draw closer to God by regularly immersing ourselves in Scripture and listening to the Spirit.

Resource Packet Item 2: My Bible Study

Distribute the worksheet, and allow a couple of minutes for students to do the self-evaluation. Then discuss the ideas on the last half of the page. Consider sharing some of the study tips from "Directing Students toward Individual Study" on pages 2–3 of this *Adult Teacher Guide*.

Discuss

- ? Think about your schedule yesterday. Did anything receive your complete attention? What does it look like when you throw yourself into an activity?
- ? How can your church ensure that its preachers and teachers are able to give themselves wholly to the tasks Paul listed in these verses?

Be Faithful to Scripture

2 Timothy 3:14–17

Say: All learning must remain grounded in the Word of God. The Scriptures are the foundation for salvation and for growing in faith and practice. They are God-breathed! They bring us into God's presence and form us into the kind of people He intended us to be. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The false teachers Paul warned against were enamored with speculation, myths, and anything that pleased people’s “itching ears” (2 Timothy 4:3). By contrast, Timothy was to be anchored in the certain truth of God’s Word. The goal is to continually advance in understanding the Bible—the standard by which any claim to truth must be evaluated.

Timothy had received instruction in God’s Word from trustworthy teachers, beginning with his mother and grandmother and culminating with the apostle Paul. He was not to deviate from this foundation but “remain faithful” to it (3:14, NLT). The verb Paul uses is the one Jesus used in John 15:4–5 to tell His disciples to remain in Him, the True Vine. The Scriptures bear witness to Jesus; to abide in Him, we must abide in them.

In stating, “All Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Timothy 3:16, NLT), Paul may have coined a new word, which literally means “God-breathed.” (There are no certain appearances of the term in Greek literature prior to this reference.) Combining the Greek words for “God” and “Spirit, wind, or breath,” Paul’s term may rightly bring to one’s mind the account of God “[breathing] the breath of life into the man’s nostrils” (Genesis 2:7, NLT). Having also been breathed into existence by God, the Scriptures are alive and powerful (Hebrews 4:12).

The Bible pulses with God-given life. All of it is profitable. All of it is useful. The NLT nicely personalizes the four simple functions of the Word: “to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right” (2 Timothy 3:16). The minister of the Word is tasked with “rightly dividing” God’s Word (2:15, KJV), assisting the community of believers in being shaped by the living Word. The goal is that all of God’s people are prepared and equipped to do every good work. Timothy held that role and responsibility in Ephesus, and our pastors, teachers, and church leaders carry the same call today: to train the body of Christ to brightly shine the light of truth in this dark world.

Discuss

? On average, how much time do you spend in Scripture each week? What adjustments (if any) might the Holy Spirit be leading you to make?

? Can you give specific examples of each of the four functions of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16, NLT) operating in your own life? Which of these might you currently need?

Part 3—Disciplines Complementary to Leadership

Disciplines for Maturing

2 Timothy 2:22–23

Say: Paul instructs Timothy to “flee also youthful lusts” (2 Timothy 2:22, NLT), a phrase some of us have heard repeated often throughout our lives. While sexual sins are certainly to be avoided, and Paul wrote often about that kind of immoral behavior, the “youthful lusts” he is referring to here may not have been primarily sexual in nature. Let’s take a closer look. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Earlier in this chapter, Paul warned against useless fighting over words and “worthless, foolish talk that only leads to more godless behavior” (2 Timothy 2:16, NLT). We saw in lesson 1 how false teachers and their pointless, destructive fascinations can lead people from the truth. Verse 23 comes right back to that peril: “Again I say, don’t get involved in foolish, ignorant arguments that only start fights” (NLT). Could these be the youthful desires Paul was referring to in verse 22—the immaturity of stubborn argumentativeness and infatuation with the latest spiritual fads?¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, New International Biblical Commentary, Vol. 13 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 263–264.

Paul commanded Timothy to “pursue righteous living, faithfulness, love, and peace” (verse 22, NLT) “with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (KJV). Note the parallel to 1 Timothy 6:11 where Paul also referred to fleeing from evil and pursuing righteousness, faith, and love. The list in 1 Timothy included “gentleness” whereas the one in 2 Timothy replaces the word with “peace,” a similar idea. These are stalwart, mature Christian virtues. They are not glamorous, provocative, or controversial but basic to being part of the family of God.

Timothy was encouraged to pursue godliness in community with others who would also worship the Lord in purity of heart. We should seek that kind of companionship; it is the proving ground of genuine faith. Peace isn’t really peace in the biblical sense unless it is found in a community. The challenges that inevitably arise from pursuing peace in community are Paul’s next topic.

Discuss

? One of Paul’s main concerns in the pastoral epistles is the danger of false teachings. Is there any modern challenge that poses a comparable threat to the church? How do Paul’s words equip us to meet the challenges of our day?

? How can we “call on the Lord with pure hearts” (2 Timothy 2:22, NLT)? In what way is this related to David’s prayer in Psalm 51:10?

? How important is repentance in maintaining a pure heart?

Resource Packet Item 3: Call on the Lord

Distribute the worksheet, assign each Scripture to an individual or small group, and then discuss the results together. If time is a factor, encourage students to complete the worksheet at home.

Disciplines for Mentoring

2 Timothy 2:24–26

Say: Since discipleship happens in community, Christian leadership involves people skills. In fact, every Christian needs to learn how to cooperate and pursue peace with other believers. Christ “makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and

growing and full of love” (Ephesians 4:16, NLT). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The word translated “servant” in 2 Timothy 2:24 means “slave” or “bond servant.” Slaves are “duty-bound . . . to their owners or masters, or those to whom total allegiance is pledged.”² In this case, we belong to Jesus—body and soul. Paul commonly refers to himself as a slave of Christ, and his wording here in verse 24 points back to verse 21 and the concept of being fit for the Master’s use. When people work together, disagreements and conflicts occasionally arise, but the Lord’s servant must handle them in a noncombative manner, seeking peace. As servants of Christ, we “must not quarrel” (verse 24, NLT). Instead, we should be “kind” (NLT; “gentle,” KJV) to all.

² William Arndt, et al. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 260.

The Lord’s servants must also be able to teach. Here is where the disciplines of study and meditation come into play. The “how-to” of teaching is helpful in terms of communication skills and being able to think on one’s feet, but more critical is the solid knowledge of biblical truth that only comes with study and waiting on the Holy Spirit.

The Lord’s servants must also be patient with difficult people. We must gently instruct (or possibly correct) those who “oppose the truth” (verse 25, NLT). The verbs Paul used in this sentence are rare, so we understand less about their full meanings than we do for more common words, but it is clear that God’s servants must deal gently with opposition in hopes of bringing others to the point of repentance. Ideally God “will give them repentance” (KJV), and they will come to know the truth and be delivered from the enemy’s deception. This may not always be the outcome, but we must do our part, speaking the truth in love with redemptive purpose. We can leave the results to God.

Discuss

- ? How does a quarrelsome disposition affect the presentation of the gospel?
- ? Why is it important to be gentle when correcting those who oppose you?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: God desires people to be transformed and display distinctive characteristics and behaviors that bear witness to Him. As the Spirit works within us, conforming us to Jesus’ image, we grow in purity, dive deeply into the Word, and lead others to grow too.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Write down “workout goals” to guide your training in godliness each day this week.
- Invite another believer to join you in one of these goals.
- Select a topic you would like to learn more about in Scripture, and then seek resource recommendations from a pastor, teacher, or other leader.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Keep Vows of Consecration.

Numbers 6:1–8

Tuesday:

Seek Wisdom and Understanding.

Proverbs 8:1–11

Wednesday:

Prioritize Body and Mind Disciplines.

Daniel 1:8–19

Thursday:

Establish Undistracted Seasons of Prayer.

Mark 1:29–39

Friday:

Develop and Maintain Ministerial Friendships.

1 Corinthians 16:10–18

Saturday:

Continue in God's Perfect Love.

1 John 4:7–21