

# 1 Timothy 4: Being Sanctified by the Word

The Epistles of the Apostle Paul to Timothy, together with his Epistle to Titus are often referred to as the “Pastoral Epistles”, as they deal with many practical situations and principles to be applied in the disciple’s daily life. Speaking of how the Ecclesias should be run, the Apostle exhorts Timothy to remain at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3), to establish the lightstand there, and “to charge some that they teach no other doctrine” than that which the Apostle had previously taught. In our reading for today, in chapter 4 of this first Epistle, the emphasis is on the effect of the true doctrine upon the true believers. It contains principles to both ensure that the ecclesia is run decently and in order, but also to prepare the brethren for life in the Kingdom to Come. The epistle is, therefore, important for us, that we might also direct our Ecclesial affairs in ways that are right in the sight of our Lord, and prepare ourselves for the day of our Master’s Return.

The chapter begins by describing the time period that the Epistle relates to:

“Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that *in the latter times* some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils ...” (1 Tim. 4:1)

These “latter times” of departure from the faith are primarily the times of the end of Judah’s commonwealth, described elsewhere as “these last days” (Heb. 1:2). This was the era in which Timothy received the inspired message from Paul, and the Epistle is primarily for his benefit, and that of the ecclesia in his day. But we also live in last days: the days immediately prior to the return of our Lord, and so the principles described by Paul are also just as applicable to us, as they were to Timothy. We must therefore give our earnest attention to them, and seek to apply them to our own lives.

The Apostle continues to speak of these false teachers, that he found them “teaching lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron” (1 Tim. 4:2). Notice the strength of the language being used here: the apostle does not refer to believers who simply have “a different point of view” to ourselves. That which he describes were “lies”, not being conformable to the Truth taught by himself and the other apostles. Elsewhere Peter refers to them as “damnable heresies” (2 Pet. 2:1) which bring “swift destruction” to those who teach and adhere to them. The example to ourselves then, is that we must seek and hold fast to the things of Truth, for it is only the “truth” that shall “make us free” (Jno. 8:32), and not the fables of men’s devising.

But these who had departed from the truth in doctrine and practice had “their conscience seared with a hot iron”. The comparison here, is of a wound being cauterised by the application of a hot iron, that the pain be not felt. So Paul describes them to the Ephesians: “Who being *past feeling* have given themselves over to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness” (Eph. 4:19). Continual sin dulls the senses: the more we do it, the easier it becomes to do. Then we can reach a point where we no longer feel guilty for doing a particular thing: our consciences become cauterised, and we become “past feeling”. But it doesn’t start that way: this is a culmination of habitual sin. The first time we do a particular proscribed thing, our consciences are pricked, but by the time it becomes a habit, we no longer have inhibitions towards that particular thing: we are “past feeling” remorse or guilt for it.

## WHAT GOD HATH CLEANSED

The next clause in this chapter brings our attention to the lessons that lay behind the food laws under the Law of Moses. The false brethren commanded the disciples “to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer” (1 Tim. 4:3-5).

But although the apostle is speaking of dietary laws, it is plain that he is bringing out the spiritual principles that lay behind those laws. “every creature of God is good”, and therefore can be eaten without guilt. But he tells us that “it is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer”: how can that related to what animals can be eaten? How can, say, pork, be sanctified by the Word and Prayer? It is clear that something else is intended: the Apostle is drawing upon the same principles revealed to and through Peter, in the case of Cornelius.

Acts chapter 10 describes the vision shown to Peter, of a vessel containing unclean animals, with the command being given: “Rise, Peter, kill and eat. But Peter said, not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common” (Acts 10:13-15). Here, unclean animals are described as having been “cleansed” by God. But how so? Peter recognised the teaching here – it was the Gentiles who were previously unclean, and now could be so cleansed. As he said to Cornelius with reference to the vision: “Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean ...” (verse 28).

The example of Cornelius was one of a Gentile man being sanctified by the adherence to the Word, and the continual offering up of Prayer (see verse 2). But there is another principle being brought in here: that of the sanctifying power of the Word of God. The Lord in his prayer to his Father made petition for his disciples: “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth” (Jno. 17:17). It is said elsewhere by the Master to his disciples “ye shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free” (Jno. 8:32). Notice, it is not the traditions or superstitions of men that can set us free. Only the Truth can have this effect, and it is important to know what that message of Truth actually is. Contrary to the claims of some, there is such a thing as absolute Truth: “thy word is Truth” taught the Master, and absolutely so – hence we need to give all due attention to the Truthful Word in order to be set free by it.

### ***BEING EXERCISED UNTO GODLINESS***

Verse 7 brings to our attention the issue of where we exert our energies:

“... but refuse profane and old wives fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come ...” (1 Tim. 4:7-8).

Men and women spend much time, money and effort into maintaining a healthy and fit body, and recognise the benefit of physical exercise. But how few exercise themselves “unto godliness”? There is only a little short term gain from working out in the gym, but to exercise our minds with things of the Spirit will provide eternal gain, both in the kingdom to come, and the lives we now lead. It is this therefore, that we should spend our energies doing.

Hebrews 5 describes the process of spiritual exercise:

“... solid food belongeth to them that are of full age, even those ***who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil***” (Heb. 5:14),.

The exertion of physical exercise strengthens the muscles and makes the body fit. Muscles need to be exercised (i.e. “by reason of use ...”), in order to maintain a level of health and fitness. So it is in spiritual things: in order to discern both good and evil, we need to “use” our senses, and exercise them as regularly as we can, to keep ourselves spiritually fit.

Whilst we endeavour to give our attention and priorities to the things of the future – i.e. the coming Kingdom of God - there is another aspect to consider: our present mortal lives. Notice the words used: “godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of **the life that now is**, and of that which is to come” (1 Tim. 4:8).

Whilst it is true that if there were no hope of resurrection and future immortality, we would be of all men most miserable (cp. 1 Cor. 15:19), there is a blessing in this life also, which comes from seeking first the things of the Truth. Messiah taught as much, saying: “seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and **all these things shall be added unto you**” (Mat. 6:33). If our primary focus is on heavenly things, our God will ensure that we have all that we need: they will be “added” unto us. Not that we will have immunity from difficult circumstances and trials, but rather that we will be provided with those things necessary to glorify Yahweh in our present lives. So the context of Messiah’s words reads: “take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? Or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Mat. 6:31-33).

### **“BE THOU AN EXAMPLE ...”**

Though he was yet young, the Apostle exhorted Timothy to not allow his youth to be a reason for him to be treated lightly:

“Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity ...” (1 Tim. 4:12).

Being appointed as an overseer of the ecclesia at Ephesus (see 1 Tim. 1:3), Timothy had a responsibility to display an example of godly conduct, that others could learn from and follow. This is an important aspect of the role of overseers: to lead by example. Hence Peter likewise exhorted:

“Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but **being examples to the flock**” (1 Pet. 5:2-3).

And we have also the words of Paul to Titus:

“young men likewise exhort to be sober minded. In all things shewing **thysself a pattern of good works**: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you” (Tit. 2:6-8).

It is not enough to simply speak the Truth: it must be lived, as “a pattern of good works” for others to follow. Those who hold prominent positions in the ecclesia ought not to be “lords over God’s heritage”, but be themselves servants, who must live out the principles of sound doctrine and behaviour.

### **GIVE ATTENTION TO READING**

In providing a good example for others to follow, Timothy was exhorted to give attention to 3 related particulars: “... give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine” (1 Tim. 4:13). Notice the progression: reading first, then exhortation and doctrine which come from that reading. There is a vital need to read the Word frequently and diligently, in order to provide sound exhortation and doctrine. So Joshua was encouraged prior to leading Israel into their inheritance:

“This book of the Law shall not depart out of thy mouth: but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success” (Josh. 1:8)

Notice the importance of having the Word within our minds: we cannot meditate upon it if it is not there to be considered. We must endeavour to always have a focus on the things of the Spirit, in order to direct our steps in acceptable ways before our Maker. But notice the purpose of meditating upon the things of the Word: **“that** thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein”. We cannot obey the Word if we do not know what it says. The purpose of Bible study is therefore to perceive the spiritual truths that we must then enact in the course of our daily lives. So Timothy was told in the second Epistle written to him:

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of Truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

The converse is also true: if we do not study, we will not be approved unto God, and we will need to be ashamed, not rightly dividing the word of Truth. But for the disciples of Christ who earnestly desire to obey his commandments, studying the Word is not a chore, but a delight. As Paul wrote: “I delight in the law of God after the inward man” (Rom. 7:22), and again, the sweet Psalmist of Israel:

“Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But **his delight is in the law of Yahweh**; and in his law doth he meditate day and night” (Psa. 1:1-2).

Studying the Word then, is both for pleasure and profit: we delight in the spiritual food of Yahweh’s providing which can sustain us through life. But there is also another emphasis: not only can the Word direct our steps aright in the sight of God, the doctrines it teaches can save us. So we read in the final verse of this chapter:

“Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee” (1 Tim. 4:16).

Notice the terms used: in taking heed to the doctrine, “thou shalt both **save** thyself and them that hear thee”. The matter is simply expressed: the doctrines of Truth can save us, but the fables of men cannot. There are those who are keen to minimise doctrinal differences between various so-called “Christian” groups, but that is not how Timothy was to engage the brethren. The power to save is in the true Gospel preached and believed in. It is “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16, see also 1 Cor. 1:18), which means that it is not merely ink on the page which we can only scrutinise at the intellectual level. It is a motivating force for good in the believer’s life, and can save our souls.

Coming to consider the Lord Jesus Christ, and the laying down of his life for his friends, we see One who was the Word made flesh. He did not walk in the counsel of the ungodly or stand in the way of sinners. He did not sit in the seat of the scornful, and his delight was in the Law of Yahweh. He meditated upon that law day and night – he is therefore the preeminent example of Psalm 1 considered above. He is the supreme example of exercising himself unto godliness, and we look to his sacrificial work as an example of strength and encouragement. And as we look to the day of his coming again, we are indeed exhorted to follow his lead, and go and do likewise.

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