



CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613

(319) 277-0924

INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

The Secret to Growing and Going in Ministry

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: 2 Timothy 3:12-4:5 (ESV)

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

Doing ministry can be very difficult. Whether you are a pastor, a Sunday school teacher, a confirmation leader, Bible study group leader, a Christ follower serving and witnessing in his name outside of the church, or even a Christian parent trying to pass on your faith to your children, ministry is challenging and trying at times. We hear that reality being expressed by the Apostle Paul in today's passage. "Rough times lay ahead, Timothy," he says,

Persecutions await those who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus. And there will continue to be opposition and an undermining towards our ministry of getting that good news of salvation through Christ that to all people. Evil persons and imposters in and outside of the church will crop up going from bad

to worse, deceiving and being deceived by untruths. Making your ministry very difficult.

Of course, this wouldn't have surprised Timothy. He was already experiencing that. And it shouldn't surprise us either, because after all, Jesus talked of his disciples needing to pick up a cross and follow Him. Just as Jesus picked up a cross for us to rescue us from sin and death, we are to pick up a cross and follow him.

Even today, gospel ministers will experience some pushback now and then, in big and small ways, in and outside of the church, as they strive to faithfully serve the cause of Jesus Christ. You can see it all around you. And deceiving imposters will sometimes pop up within the body of Christ and even outside the body of Christ and wreak havoc with teachings that are heresy and apostasy, such as legalism, universalism, syncretism, nationalism, civil religion, and new ageism. All these kinds of teachings weaken the gospel message of salvation, and they lead people in the church astray and undermine the church's mission in the world.

So, the question is, how do ministers of the gospel keep growing and going for Jesus Christ when all of these things are happening around them and toward them? Here's Paul's counsel to Timothy and to us as well, he says: "As for you, ministers continue," which means keep believing and adhering to. He says, "continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, keeping in mind from whom you've learned it," meaning for Timothy, his mom and his grandma and Paul, his spiritual father, who led him to Christ and trained him for ministry. And what is Timothy to be continuing in – and you and I as well? Paul is talking about the gospel, the good news of Christ crucified for the sins of the world, raised again for our salvation, which has been revealed to us, Paul says, through Scripture, which he refers to as the sacred writings. Sacred is a word which means holy, set apart as special by God himself. So, if we are to have solid footing while following and serving Jesus as gospel ministers, then we need to be sticking with Scripture as our firm foundation. Paul reminds Timothy that scripture is able to make one wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. It has power then to open one's eyes and heart to the good news of Jesus Christ and bring about conversion in a person. That's how it happened in Timothy's life – through the word.

Paul then goes on to speak highly of this scripture and what it can do in a Christian's life. First of all, he says scripture, all scripture, Old and New Testament, is God-breathed. What does that mean? It means simply this: it carries authority because it

originates from God, and the Holy Spirit of God works through it. So, it's living and active, and it does something in the life of a person who will read it and study it and apply it. Then Paul points out that all Scripture is profitable, which means useful. It's useful for teaching us the truths about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, ourselves, God's rescue plan for the world, and His expectations of His own people. It's useful for reproving. It exposes the errors of false teachings which would lead us away from God. Remember, Jesus defied Satan with scripture as he was being tempted out in the wilderness. It's useful for correction, Paul says. It teaches us the thinking and behavior which we need to be avoiding or stepping away from. And it trains us in righteousness, teaching us what it looks like to live a godly life that reflects the righteous one, Jesus, who lived the perfect life of obedience to His Heavenly Father.

And he says, and the results of doing these things is that the men and women of God who live in that scripture, meaning Timothy and all believers in Christ, will then be complete, equipped and trained for every good work God has given us to do. To be complete, it means proficient, adept. We'll be ready to take on things. We'll be effective, effective disciples of Jesus stick with scripture, is what Paul's telling us. They study it. They let it dwell in them richly, and then they follow scripture as their authority in all matters of life and faith. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. Paul is simply echoing what Jesus promised when he said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples. And you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

As I read Paul's words here, I can't help but be reminded of Luther's meaning of the third article of the Apostles Creed, where he writes of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. He says,

I believe that I cannot buy my own understanding or effort, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel [Scripture.] Enlighten me with His gifts and sanctified and kept me in true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers and sanctifies the whole Christian church on Earth and keeps a united with Jesus in the one true faith.

So how does one believe and receive Jesus and stay with Him and grow strong in faith and serve him well? Through Scripture, which shows us the good news about God who so loved the world that He gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. The Scripture, which shows us what it means to live the abundant life that Christ came to give us. The Scripture, the tool and sword of the Holy Spirit, working in us, changing us. So, believe it, Paul says, open it, read it, study it,

obey it. Don't walk away from it. Love it, and build your life upon it because it pays great dividends in your life.

And then Paul moves on, he says, “And do this as well as a minister. Preach that word,” meaning proclaim it, communicate its truth to other people. Be ready in season and out of season, he says, which means whether it's convenient or not or popular or not, teach it. Everything should come from it. Every message should be scripture-based. Use it for reproving, rebuking, and exhorting others with patience and teaching. Patience simply means long suffering with those who make you want to tear your hair out and scream at them in frustration. Like any good conformation leader knows what that's about. And teaching, explaining, showing them the basics, showing them the fulfillment of God's promises in the Old Testament, instructing and Christian kingdom living, correcting and urging to always walk in the footsteps of Jesus, to do life his way.

And then the Apostle Paul gives the reason why we need to keep doing this, because the time is coming, Paul says, when people will not endure sound teaching. They'll only want to listen to things that suit their own passions, they'll only want to listen to preachers and teachers that will tell them what they want to hear, not what they need to hear. People inside and outside of the church will turn heads away from listening to the truth of sound doctrine and righteous living, and they will follow myths and make a shipwreck of their lives. That makes Scripture then all the more crucial for ministers to hold on to so people can hear and understand. So, we stick with scripture and we don't quit communicating it no matter what. People need the truth about the redemptive action of God in Christ, dying for the forgiveness of our sin, and on the third day rising to give us a rich heavenly inheritance. They need the word's guidance on what it means to live abundantly in a crazy, mixed-up world.

And Paul finishes by saying, “As for you, minister, be sober minded,” which means keep your head about you at all times. “Endure suffering. Be willing to suffer for the word. Stick with it and don't quit teaching and communicating it to others.” That's your God-given ministry in Christ that you are called to fulfill. This strong encouragement from Paul applies to every person who has tasted God's grace in Christ and is therefore called to be a minister.

In our church bulletin on Sunday mornings, we had printed each week right below the heading under the worship service, heading “Pastor Steve Kramer.” The next line reads

“Ministers: all the members of the congregation.” We're all ministers of the Gospel in Christ. So, the bottom line is, my fellow ministers, be people of the word, the Bible, continuing it for your own inner growth and strength and fruitfulness and effectiveness as a Christ follower. Always be ready to unashamedly communicate it confidently. And stand upon it as authority. These teachings of Paul are a timeless help for Christ followers in every generation. It always will need to be the emphasis in the church in order for the body of Christ to grow spiritually and numerically and have an impact on a world full of people that need Jesus. The church is to always be a people living under the authoritative God-breathed Scripture. Otherwise, we will be rendered ineffective and useless for fulfilling the Great Commission Jesus gave us to make disciples of all people. Without its authority over us, we will be like a wave of the sea that's driven and tossed by every wind. We will be unstable and unusable.

So, if you are a person who has tasted God's grace through faith in Christ, join me, won't you, in committing your life to be a follower of Christ whose roots will always be planted deeply in the rich soil of Scripture? That involves moving beyond only hearing it on a Sunday morning. It's crucial that in order to have a change us and draw us closer to Jesus and make us effective for Jesus, that we open it up daily and read it and reflect upon it and also study it to discover God's treasures for ourselves about living the life Christ came to give. It means perhaps attending a Bible class, an overview class, or join a group to study the Bible together. There are some wonderful Bible study books I have found that really have served me well in leading my Bible study groups. It's from the Good Book Company. I've done them alone and I've done the most groups, and they have been very, very helpful. So, there are life-changing blessings for those who commit to do that, to stick with it, to grow in Scripture now getting knowledgeable and having it in your heart, and then you go public with it. If you're a preacher, boldly preach it with authority. And if you're a layperson, always be ready to communicate its truths gently and patiently with those around you, always trusting in its power to convert.

I want to finish with something I read in a book by John Ortberg that I think is profound and sums up this passage from Paul to Timothy quite well. It begins:

If you were marooned on a desert island and could have only a single book with you. What would you choose? Somebody once asked this question of G.K. Chesterton. Given his reputation as one of the most learned and creative Christian thinkers of the 20th century, one would naturally expect his response to be the Bible, of course. It was not, though. Chesterton chose the book Thomas's

Guide to Practical Shipbuilding. And that makes sense, Of course, when we're trapped on an island, we want a book that will help us get home. We want a book that will show us how to be saved. The truth is that we are all trapped – trapped in patterns of thought and behavior that lead to death. G.K. Chesterton himself once said that the doctrine of the fall into sin is the one Christian belief that is empirically verifiable. We are all trapped on an “I-land” where we know neither ourselves nor God, and we are looking for a message that help is on the way.

So, the followers of Christ have historically sought to be a people devoted to Scripture. John Wesley said that a pivotal point in his life came when he prayed to become a man of one book. The words that bombard us all day long from billboards and tabloids and the Internet and talk shows can pull us in a thousand directions. But the word that God speaks from his scripture can renew our minds and guide our lives and keep us in Christ. So as God said to Saint Augustine, long, long, long ago, he is still saying to us, “Take it and read, take it and read, for there is power and life in his scripture.”

Let's pray, Lord, thank you for your holy and precious word. Help us to stick with it as our authority and to come to know it and follow it in all matters of life and faith. Amen.