

Preaching to Myself

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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1 Timothy 4:1-16

This summer a headline swept through the news outlets that caught my attention because it concerned a writer and pastor whose work touched my life in high school. Back then a 20-something author named Joshua Harris had written a book called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. The book gained quite a following in the late 1990s in Christian circles, especially in places where Christian families and adolescents were concerned about dating and sexual ethics.

At the time, for me, Harris' guidelines about a friendship-courtship model of getting to know members of the opposite sex was attractive. It was reassuring. It provided clear guidance on something that felt anything but clear in my own life. So if casual dating was unwise and intentional courtship was "more biblical"—sign me up. Surely this would spare me the pain and heartbreak of the dating scene—and it offered a way to pursue holiness and purity, too.

My parents were not convinced that this approach was entirely necessary or free from pitfalls itself. Knowing that I found certain brands of rule-keeping comforting, they let me buy the book and offered good-natured challenges to what I was reading. With the benefit of hindsight and others' reflections, it occurs to me that there was some danger here, a potential counter gospel, a form of godliness that missed out on its true source in the righteousness offered to us by faith in Jesus Christ. While it remains true that Jesus calls his people to holy lives, this particular approach to romantic relationships had the potential to set up the pursuit of purity as an idol in the place of the God it sought to honor.

A couple of years ago, Harris acknowledged he no longer held to the teachings of his books. Fast forward to this summer, when he made a series of announcements, culminating in the lamentable acknowledgement that he no longer considers himself a Christian at all.

"I have undergone a massive shift in regard to my faith in Jesus. The popular phrase for this is 'deconstruction,' the biblical phrase is 'falling away.' By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian. Many people tell me that there is a different way to practice faith and I want to remain open to this, but I'm not there now." Harris said in his Instagram post.

I followed this news with a heavy heart, as did others. Harris' turning away from Christian faith came after years of apparently devoted service in the church. When a visible and influential pastor turns away from the Christian faith they held out for others, it's time to ask the Spirit of Jesus to keep working. Harris's statements also prompted me to self-examination—just how are Christians, especially pastors, to keep watch over our souls so that after we have preached to others, we ourselves are not disqualified for the prize?

The Spirit clearly says, Paul tells Timothy in chapter 4, that in the era after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, some within the church will abandon the faith. We shouldn't be surprised--the Spirit said it would be this way. Why and how can this happen? What is our human part in all of it? The Greek word for abandoning the faith in 1 Timothy 4 is the root of our English word 'apostasy.' It means making a clear change in direction or relationship to someone or something. The idea of removing oneself or deserting are good substitutes.

How might believers abandon the faith? This passage suggests not an aimless wandering or even doubt, which is an expected part of the Christian journey, but an intentional defection. Some members of the church community have come to follow other teachings.

False teaching is *the* problem Paul writes to address in the Ephesian church. Ephesus was a leading city of the Roman world, third in population after Rome and Alexandria. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple to the Greek goddess Artemis, was in Ephesus. Paul found himself and his followers in some trouble here on his third missionary journey, when conversions to Christianity started cutting into the profits of the silversmiths who crafted idols of Artemis. The gospel had taken root in this cosmopolitan city, and the church there needed tending.

So at the beginning of the letter, Paul wastes no time on pleasantries but urges his young delegate Timothy to attend to what is really important. He dives right into Timothy's primary assignment, an utmost concern of the whole letter:

1 Timothy 1:3: Paul says: “As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God’s work—which is by faith.”

The false teachers, Paul says, no longer enjoy the protection of an undivided heart or a good conscience. Their teachings come “through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.”

By ignoring their consciences, the false teachers have damaged them. The result is either moral insensitivity or a conscience branded by God’s enemy, or both. In either case the false teachers’ good judgment has been compromised. And so it happens that an ascetic lifestyle, one that shuns marriage and certain foods, is set up as a competing gospel, a wrongheaded pathway to “right” living.

Paul has no patience for this counter gospel. It is so very dangerous because it exchanges the truth of salvation in Christ alone for practices that could seem to be aimed at serving “purity” or “discipline,” concepts that fit with Christianity, but in reality serve a false gospel. “These are lies from the pit of hell! Demonic teachings! Timothy, command that these things not be taught. Dismiss them as so many tales and fables. Instead, Timothy, ground yourself in what you know to be true. What does the faith handed down to us teach? That everything God created is good. That all foods are now clean, to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.”

“Timothy, if you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus.”

And now we come to the title of this message—Preaching to Myself. Timothy was likely in his early 30s while he served at Ephesus—still considered young for the responsibilities he had. It’s not hard to imagine that he wanted very much to be a good minister. The assurance Paul offers Timothy here is part of what led me to study this passage. I want to be a good minister. The things I read in this chapter are messages for me! But they’re messages for you, too. Acknowledging that it is God who works in us, how can I—how can the other pastors and volunteer leaders of this church—be assured that we are serving Christ and this community well? Not perfectly, but faithfully?

Paul’s next instructions to Timothy give just such guidance. The best defense against turning away from true faith is a good offense—active training in the faith.

Paul says this: “Continue nourishing yourself in the words of the faith and of the good teaching you have faithfully followed. But reject the myths of the godless and gullible. Instead, train yourself toward godliness. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for life now and the one to come.”

Timothy is to go into training in terms of his own faith. He is to go on a spiritual diet, feeding on the good teaching that he has inherited; starving any attention to the false gospel. He is to exercise in God, practicing life in Jesus Christ, conforming his life to the hope of the gospel. He is to strive and labor—not in the way of the false teachers’ acetic practices, but leaning with all his might toward “hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, in particular believers.” (vv. 8-10).

And it seems that here Paul expects the strangest thing to happen: As Timothy laces up his shoes each day for training in godliness, as he feeds himself with on the truth of Jesus, his starting point for life and ministry is simply the good news of Christ. No false or suspicious teachings, no misplaced self-denial, no desire for worldly gain. No other focal points will do—he is singularly devoted to the hope of life in Christ. This good teaching so fills and permeates his life that there is no room for counterfeits.

Brothers and sisters, I’m asking myself and you, members of the priesthood of all believers—are we eating well? Nice and full--nourished by the beauty and grace of God, salvation in Christ, by grace, through faith? And do we exercise our hearts, minds, and lives in imitation of Jesus? Or are we inclined to spend energy on unhelpful disagreements that build on a foundation other than Christ? Questions for me as I look ahead to the week.

Paul concludes this chapter with a statement just as sure as the one he makes at the beginning of the chapter. Though false teaching is leading some astray in the church, through Timothy’s faithful ministry many also will be saved. “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

Hear the gracious promise of God to you, Timothy: you have what you need. Timothy, you have been well-taught. Timothy, you stand in the line of Apostle Paul on the authority of the gospel of Jesus himself. So

“set an example for the believers,” teach with your life. Keep at it one day at a time. Command and teach these things. Through you, Timothy, God will make the message of salvation in Jesus effective. This promise gives those of us seeking to labor and strive in this direction great hope.

Despite the examples of Christian leaders who have turned away from faith, despite the personal anxieties and frailties pastors face along with church people, God IS sustaining the faith of Christian people, pastors and leaders. We don't live or teach perfectly, but we can live and teach faithfully.

Through you, elders, God speaks (!) to those in a season of challenge. Through you, Bible study leaders (!) God touches the hearts of those who need him. Through you, church school teachers, God points students toward Jesus.

We of all people get to participate in building God's church. It's an amazing trust. But also know this: God has been at work to sustain his people throughout history and he promises to continue to work in us until the day Jesus returns.

The closing words of 1 Timothy 3 serve as a statement of true faith, a point of departure for Timothy's and our good teaching in the face of counter gospels: “Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.”

The source of our godliness is not merely a true teaching—though it is that--it is a relationship with the one True Human and True God, Jesus Christ. And this is one aspect of the very good news of the gospel—that the saving work begins and ends with him. Into the sacred trust and real responsibility that pastors and church leaders have comes the whisper of the Spirit of God, assuring us that Jesus is always working to speak to his people through them to build his church.

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