

Eleven Characteristics of an Excellent Minister

Contributed by John MacArthur Jr.

The epistle of I Timothy was written to instruct Timothy on how to minister to the church at Ephesus. The key phrase appears in verse 6: "Thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ. "Minister" is the translation of the Greek word diakonos, from which we get the English word deacon. It means "servant" and is used of those who hold the office of deacon in the church. Although the word is not used here in a technical way to designate that office, it implies that anyone who serves in any capacity in ministry must see himself as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are called to be servants and stewards, managing that which belongs to God in a way that will bring honor to His name. In I Timothy 4:6-16, the apostle Paul gives eleven characteristics of being an excellent minister of Christ.

1. Warns People of Error

In I Timothy 4:1-5, Paul talks about doctrines of demons propagated by seducing spirits through lying hypocrites. Then he instructs Timothy to warn the church about such doctrines. "Put the brethren in remembrance of these things" (v. 6).

Ministry demands warning others about the destructiveness of false doctrine. A servant of Christ must teach people to be discerning by encouraging them to think biblically.

The church's failure to be discerning in this generation has allowed it to become infiltrated by all kinds of error. Limp theology and convictionless preaching have replaced strong doctrine and clear exposition of Scripture. The legacy has been tragic. The church has been flooded with confusion, unbiblical psychology, occult influences, success-oriented philosophy, and prosperity theology.

The church must draw the lines between error and truth and build up its people in the Word of God. God holds pastors accountable to warn their people of spiritual danger. If they fail to do so, they will have to answer to God (Heb. 13:17).

2. An Expert Student of Scripture

"Nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, unto which thou hast attained" (v. 6). The Greek word translated "nourished up" is a present passive participle, implying that being nourished with the Word of God is a continual process of feeding. That involves reading Scripture, meditating on it, interacting with it, and studying it until you've mastered the material.

To be able to think and speak biblically, a pastor must spend a large portion of his time interacting with the text of Scripture. It is an inexhaustible treasure that demands a lifetime just to begin to understand its riches. We must commit ourselves to studying, understanding, and articulating the Word of God.

3. Avoids the Influence of Unholy Teaching

"Refuse profane and old wives' fables" (v. 7). "Fables" is a translation of the Greek word muthos, from which the English word myth is derived. Second Timothy 4:4 says that some "shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables." Truth and fables are seen as opposites. The Christian is to be nourished by the truth and refuse that which opposes it.

4. Disciplines Himself in Personal Godliness

The issue in ministry is godliness. It isn't how clever you are or how well you communicate; it's whether you know the Word of God and are leading a godly life. Ministry is an overflow of the latter.

First Timothy 4:7 says, "Exercise thyself rather unto godliness." The English word gymnasium comes from the Greek word here translated "exercise" (gumnazō), used of those who trained themselves in athletic endeavors. It implies rigorous, self-sacrificing training. "Keep yourself in training for godliness" would be an accurate way to translate Paul's exhortation to Timothy.

Physical exercise profits little (v. 8). In contrast, "godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come" (v. 8). Godliness is profitable not only for the body but also for the soul. If you're going to make a New Year's resolution, don't resolve to go to the gym three times a week if you're not spending time in the Word of God every day and cultivating godliness. The present benefit of spiritual discipline is a fulfilled, God-blessed, fruitful, and useful life. And the blessings of godliness carry on into eternity.

5. Committed to Hard Work

Having called us to be godly, Paul now brings us back to earth. The ministry is a heavenly pursuit, but it is also an earthly task--it's hard work. "We both labor [strive] and suffer reproach" (v. 10).

Paul worked hard because he knew his effort had eternal consequences--reward for himself and the possibility of changing the destiny of unbelievers. That is the perspective that propels the servant of God.

"Labor" (Gk., *kopiaō*) means "to work to the point of weariness." "Suffer reproach" (Gk., *agōnizomai*) means "to agonize in a struggle." We work to the point of weariness and exhaustion, often in pain, because we understand our eternal objectives.

In 2 Corinthians 11:24-27 Paul tells of the many times he was beaten with rods and a whip, and endured weariness, suffering, pain, agony, and shipwreck. He endured all those perils because he was totally committed to the ministry at hand. Why? Because he had eternity in view. He realized that the destiny of souls hung in the balance.

Our whole work is a labor but not human labor: Paul said his goal was to "present every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (Col. 1:28). Then he said, "For this I also labor [Gk., *kopiaō*, "agonize"], striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily" (v. 29). Our work isn't performed in the flesh. Through the Spirit the Lord energizes those who serve Him.

6. Teaches with Authority

"These things command and teach," Paul instructed Timothy (v. 11). The Greek word translated "teach" in verse 11 refers to passing on information, in this case passing on instruction or doctrine. It is to be done in the form of a command.

There is much popular, entertainment-oriented preaching today, but not much that is powerful or transforming in nature. According to Acts 17:30 God "commandeth all men everywhere to repent" (emphasis added).

Matthew 7:28-29 says, "It came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings [the Sermon on the Mount], the people were astonished at His doctrine; for He taught them as one having authority." Paul told Timothy many times to be authoritative. In 1 Timothy 1:3 he says, "Charge some that they teach no other doctrine." Then he said, "These things command" (5:7). That doesn't mean we are to be abusive or ungracious. But we are to confront people when they disobey God's Word.

The faithful servant is bold. He challenges sin head on. He confronts unbelief, disobedience, and lack of commitment. God said of Jesus, "This is my beloved Son . . . hear ye Him" (Matt. 17:5). The excellent servant carries on that directive, commanding all men to repent and listen to Jesus Christ.

7. A Model of Spiritual Virtue

Paul wrote Timothy, "Let no man despise thy youth, but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (v. 12). When you set an example, you are giving people a pattern to follow. Someone once said, "Your life speaks so loud I can't hear what you say." Your lifestyle is your most powerful message.

The author of Hebrews said, "Remember them who have rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God, whose faith follow" (13:7). When you minister in the church, you are to lead a life that others can follow. That's a tremendous challenge, which is why James said, "Be not many teachers, knowing that we shall receive the greater judgment" (James 3:1). It's a serious matter to be guilty of teaching error or living hypocritically. A man's life must match his message. Tragically, that principle is violated constantly in the ministry.

Timothy was young, probably under forty, and was therefore subject to a certain amount of questioning. So Paul told Timothy that he had to be respected if people were going to follow him. But since he was young, Timothy would have to earn that respect. How was he going to do that? By being "an example [to] the believers, in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12).

IN WORDThe conversation of the servant of God is to be exemplary.

Ephesians 4 tells us what our speech should be like. Verse 25 says, "Putting away lying." A servant of the Lord should never speak any falsehood. He shouldn't talk out of both sides of his mouth--telling one thing to one person and another to someone else. Then Paul says, "Speak every man truth with his neighbor" (v. 25). You should speak the truth to everyone.

In verse 26 Paul says, "Be ye angry, and sin not." There's a place for holy wrath and righteous indignation but not for the sin of anger. No excellent servant is to reach the point where he is so upset that his words are bitter, vengeful, or ungracious.

Verse 29 says, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth." The speech of a believer should never be less than pure. There's no place for corrupt or filthy communication in the Christian life.

Speech that glorifies God "is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers" (v. 29). There's a place for fun and joy, for "a merry heart doeth good like a medicine" (Prov. 17:22). But there's no place for perverse talk, angry speech, or a lying tongue.

IN CONDUCTYou are to be a model of righteous living--a person who lives out his convictions based on biblical principles. The things you do, the places you go, the things you possess--every aspect of your life is a sermon. That sermon either contradicts or substantiates what you say.

What do you spend your time, money, and energy on? The lifestyle propagated by the world today is completely incompatible with the standards of Scripture. And the church, instead of maintaining a contrasting lifestyle, too often mimics the world's perspectives.

IN LOVEMinistering in love doesn't necessarily mean you're to be a handshaker and a back-slapper. The apostle Paul and Epaphroditus showed their love to the church by hard work (1 Thess. 2:7-12; Phil. 2:27-30). Sometimes I ask myself, Should I stay and spend myself at Grace Church, or move on to another ministry? Yet I know God has called me to give my life to the people of this church. That's how my love for the brethren is expressed. We are to offer self-sacrificing service on behalf of others.

IN FAITHThe Greek word translated "faith" in 1 Timothy 4:12 could be translated "faithfulness," "trustworthiness," or "consistency." Timothy was to be consistent, faithful, and trustworthy in his ministry. In 1 Corinthians 4:2 Paul says, "It is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful." People can follow that kind of leader.

IN PURITYThe Greek word translated "purity" (hagneia) refers not only to sexual chastity but also to the intent of the heart. If your heart is pure, your behavior will be pure as well.

History has shown us that a ministry can be devastated by sexual impurity on the part of its leaders. Men in leadership are vulnerable in that area when they let their guard down. We must maintain absolute moral purity.

8. A Thoroughly Biblical Ministry

"Till I come," Paul told Timothy, "give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" (v. 13).

READINGIn verse 13 a definite article appears in the Greek text before the word translated "reading." Timothy was to give attention to "the reading." In the services of the early church a time was set aside for the reading of Scripture. It was followed by an exposition of the text.

That model of expository preaching comes from Nehemiah 8:8: "They read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading." Scripture needs to be explained so people can understand it.

EXHORTATIONIf the reading and exposition of Scripture tell us what it means, exhortation is a call for people to apply it. To exhort is to warn people to obey with a view toward judgment. We are to encourage people to respond properly, telling them about the blessing or the consequences of their actions.

DOCTRINEThe Greek word translated "doctrine" (didaskalia) means teaching. That means systematically teaching the Word of God in both group and individual settings. Didaskalia appears fifteen times in the pastoral epistles. That gives us some idea of its importance to the life of the church. No wonder the pastor must be "apt to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2)

9. Fulfills His Calling

In 1 Timothy 4:14 Paul writes, "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery." Some people go into the ministry but bail out because they weren't called there in the first place. But sometimes people who are called into the ministry bail out, and that is a defection from where God intends them to be.

There are many people in the ministry who serve for a while but quickly fade away. In contrast, I am in awe of those who are faithful to minister the Word of God right to the end of their lives. They may have a small congregation, they may be unknown, but they remain faithful and fulfill their calling.

The true mark of an excellent servant of Jesus Christ is that he fulfills his calling to the end.

10. Absorbed in His Work

"Meditate upon these things," Paul told Timothy, "give thyself wholly to them" (v. 15). The Greek word translated "meditate" (meletaō) conveys the idea of thinking through beforehand, planning, strategizing, or premeditating. When a minister is not doing the work of the ministry, he's to be planning it.

"Give thyself wholly to them" literally reads "be in them" in the Greek text. It doesn't take much of a man to be a minister, but it does take all of him.

A minister can't have a double agenda. He can't divide his efforts between being in the ministry and becoming a tennis pro, a golf pro, making money, or developing a business on the side. Paul told Timothy to "be diligent in season, out of

season" (2 Tim. 4:2). Greek scholar Fritz Rienecker tells us that the word translated "diligent" (ephestemi) is a military word. It means to stay at your post, to stay on duty. A servant of God is never off duty; he is always at his post.

11. Progressing in Spiritual Growth

"That thy profiting may appear to all" (v. 15) suggests that Timothy's spiritual progress should have been obvious to everyone. That implies he hadn't yet reached perfection. A minister should not try to convince his people that he has no flaws; instead he should allow them to see his growth. The standard for a servant of Christ is high, and we all fall short of it. People need to see our integrity and humility.

Humanly speaking, no one is fit for the task of ministry. Yet when we yield to the Spirit of God and depend on Him for what we can never accomplish on our own, His power will work through us.

Paul concludes 1 Timothy 4 by saying, "Take heed unto thyself and unto the doctrine; continue in them" (v. 16). Timothy was to focus on two things: his conduct and his teaching. Those two things are the heart of the ministry. The eleven qualities we've seen in this passage can be summed up in those two commands.

Scripture repeatedly affirms that those who are genuinely saved will continue in the faith. Paul assured Timothy that his continuing in personal holiness and accurate teaching would move him along the inevitable path of final and glorious salvation: "For in doing this thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee" (v. 16). His perseverance would be the proof that his faith was genuine.

If we persevere in godliness and truth, our lives will affect others; we'll bring them the message of salvation. We don't actually do the saving, but we are used by God as we preach the Word of God and live godly lives. All the qualifications of an excellent servant ultimately result in the salvation of souls. That is our purpose in life and the reason we remain in the world after we've been redeemed. If all God wanted was our worship, He could take us to heaven at the moment of our salvation. But He wants us to bring the message of salvation to lost people. That's the sum of ministry. It's a high, holy, and glorious calling!

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