

“SEE THAT THEY LOOK UP...”

Text: 1 Timothy, 4:11-16

Occasion: Sunday Service, Otumoetai Baptist Church

Date: 2nd December, 2018

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There might be something about me which is slightly unusual—not for a student mind you—but certainly for a pastor. You might’ve noticed it... it’s my age of course! I am coming to you quite young this morning. “What might this young buck have to offer us over this summer?” the more cynical of you might be thinking; “What does this 20-something know about life and faith?” Well, frankly, very little! I am, you will be glad to know, at least trying to take Declan’s advice and grow out a bit of beard, force some facial hair onto my face, but so far it’s not going so well...

A time ago there was another church leader appointed who was not terribly unlike myself: a young man who’d shown some promise, but still had a way to go. This young person had been following about the great Apostle Paul, travelling with him on his various missions and trips around the Roman Empire. They’d visited the great cities of Greek and Roman civilisation, seen the many wonders of the ancient world together; soaring Corinthian pillars and grand temples of Artemis. They’d seen the Spirit of God work in remarkable ways and watched as the church of Christ grew from a humble group gathered in backwaters of provincial Judea to a growing and spreading movement across the known world. Yet there was still plenty of work to be done.

Paul had grown fond of his young companion, Timothy was his name. Since their first meeting Paul could see that there was something about Timothy that God had given to him, and so, when news came up about the church in Ephesus following false teaching and struggling to hold fast to the gospel, Paul sent his young protégé, Timothy. In a letter to Timothy, Paul writes our text for this morning, the Word of God to you:

“Command and teach these things. Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (1 Tim 4:11-16 NIV).

Let's pray. "King Jesus, we are encountering you this morning. As we open your word, Eternal Spirit blow through us, speaking to us afresh, and revealing to us your will for our lives, this community, our neighbourhoods, cities, and beyond. Thank you that you promise to be here when we gather and open your word together." **Amen.**

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This, of course, is a famous passage from First Timothy, a letter which Paul likely wrote to his student and companion Timothy while he pastored the church in Ephesus through a difficult time. While it does have some things to say about youth, this passage is fundamentally about the character and shape of Christian vocation and leadership. While not all of us may be leaders or church pastors like Timothy, we all have leadership in various ways in our lives. Some of you lead in your families, others have management at work. Whether it is formal or not, you can't help but influence lead within the contexts you might be in. So listen to what Paul has to say to us today about faithful Christian leadership.

Here's the gist of the whole thing: **Christian leadership, unlike leadership within the world, is leadership by example.** I'll say that again, Christian leadership, unlike leadership in the world, is leading by example.

This is a very practical text with many implications and points, but this morning we are going to look at three: (i) leadership by character, (ii) leadership by Word, and (iii) leadership by perseverance.

I thought this morning this text might make a fitting address as my first message to you all. There is an old Puritan minister's prayer that reads, "Make my every sermon a means of grace to myself," and perhaps there are few texts as pertinent for me in my own situation right now. So if you will indulge me, let's strive this morning to both be formed together by this passage.

I. Leadership by Character (v 12; 14)

Paul opens with that famous line: "*Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example...*" The Greek here is actually more forceful than the NIV renders, literally it reads, 'let no one despise you,' or 'show contempt.'

Clearly Timothy is heading into a context where he would face opposition. While the word for youth (*neotēs*) could refer to someone in their 30s, there were likely older members of the church who did not want to follow a young leader. The church was also in a difficult time being misled by various headstrong men and materialistic women who had their own idolatrous ideas about Christian life and belief.

Paul's advice is clear: do not respond with your own scorn or contempt, but by pursuing godly character. Set an example for the believers. J.B. Phillips translation puts it best when he writes, "Don't let people

look down on you because you are young: see that they *look up* to you because you are an example to them.”¹

Youth may not be the only ailment which limits leadership. There are many things in this world which you may feel discredit you. Perhaps you do not feel as though you are very eloquent, that communication or public speaking hold you back. Maybe you feel as though your introverted character limits your reach in a bold extraverted world.

Maybe there are real prejudices against you, that as a woman you feel as though you are not taken seriously as a leader. Or perhaps you have felt the chill of passive racist attitudes, and though your colleagues would never admit it you, you know you have been held back because of their prejudice. Lest we believe we are beyond issues of sexism or racism in our society or church, I encourage you to look up when you get home Māori director Taika Waititi’s story and experience in a country he loves like New Zealand. His exact phrasing I will not repeat here...

These are issues of justice that need to be corrected, but regardless of what action we take, Paul is very clear about the manner and character in which we act: do not stoop down and respond with your own contempt or prejudice—as is so tempting to do—but instead set an example, in love, faith, speech, conduct, and purity.

That is as good a list as any to live by: faith, speech, conduct, love, and purity, five values to earnestly pursue. Memorise them and stick them on your wall.

This is so different from the natural human tendency when it comes to leadership. The ways of God are not intuitive to us or the world’s model of leading. Ours is a natural condition of authoritarian leadership, of the tired cliché, ‘do as I say not as I do.’ I used to hate it when my Dad said that.

But this is not the way in which followers of Jesus are to lead, in church, out of church, at home, at work—anywhere! Instead (and this is much more difficult mind you) we are to live and lead *by example*, not responding to hate with hate by remaining above the noise. These ways of God are not intuitive to the normal human condition.

And here’s the thing of course: very rarely to we tend to behave like this within the church. Let’s take a look at just two of Paul’s list: speech and conduct.

Now, being upset with a fellow brother or sister in Christ is totally fine. In fact, being very upset, even furious with another believer is okay as there are some things worth getting upset about! There are very valid reasons why age and experience matter in leadership, yet to be discriminated against because of

¹ J.B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), 439, emphasis added.

race or sex are things we should rightfully rage against! These do not belong in the community of the King.

But when we are upset about something, petty or not, we take it to God. Read the Psalms, there is plenty of anguish and anger there, but it is directed to who? God.

What do we do? “You won’t *believe* what that person did to me just then.” “Did you see what that person did on Sunday the other day?”

Hear me correctly: there are times and places to let out frustration and anger, to God and in prayer, but churches become nasty places when gossip and petty anger rule. People hold onto the smallest of things and won’t let them go. Gossip and bitterness spread like cancer throughout the people of God and destroy churches. Do not let that happen. Guard your tongue, your speech and conduct as the text commands, guard them around others and set an example for the believers instead of turning to gossip and pettiness. Treat everyone with kindness and good intent. We are to pursue leadership by example, which is a much harder and more demanding task, but it is vital if we want to be faithful as the people of God.

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Later, in verse 15, Paul says we are to be diligent in these matters. The Greek word here is *meletaō*. As well as referring to diligence, it has a very wide meaning, referring to an act of cultivating and practicing. The Message puts it well: “Cultivate these things. Immerse yourself in them.”

We are to cultivate and immerse ourselves to these values, to this godly character: ways of love, speech, purity, faith, and conduct. How do we do this?

II. Leadership by Word (v 13; 15-16)

Once again, Paul is very clear and very practical: by the reading and teaching of the Word. The phrase which the NIV translates “*public reading of Scripture*” is quite a rare one, but it refers specifically to the practice from which Christian preaching originates: when passages of the Old Testament were read out in the Jewish synagogues and then expounded by teachers and scribes.

The great evangelical leader of the 20th century John Stott famously wrote on the first page of his book on preaching: “Preaching is indispensable to Christianity.”²

There may be many of you here that disagree with this claim. I find myself even wavering in certainty from time to time. Modern questions of learning styles or attention span loom over the sermon, pastors more and more devote less time and significance to preaching. I know the church I came from the

² John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 1.

pastors would often be preparing their message a day before Sunday on a good week. Even very recently in a stimulating discussion over dinner we were having a conversation about preaching and the nature of Sunday church.

Yet preaching has not gone away and, so long as the church is around (which is forever), the faithful opening of the Scriptures, where men and women stand up before God's people and open to Scriptures to hear God's voice, is indispensable to Christian life. Do not buy into the myth. Ted Talks, and all their spin offs, have proven that the sermon format is not going away, but much more importantly the practice of Christian preaching, the public reading of Scripture is indispensable for the community of God.

To expand this, the practice of gathering around the Word of God for worship on a regular basis is *vital* for individual believers and for the church. We cannot avoid this: as the author of Hebrews writes, "not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb 10:24).

There are many questions facing us as a church in this age. Questions of online church or podcasting, as we experience the decline in regular church attendance. My understanding is that in the typical Baptist church in New Zealand the average number of times a congregant attends a Sunday is twice a month! This cannot do.

We must be diligent in meeting together under the Word and in worship. This is non-negotiable, we must as a community be regularly formed under the gathering and worship of the church—not because there some magic formula about church on a Sunday, but because Christ himself is present. We need more pastors, laypeople, and theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose central conviction was that in the gathering community of Christ, Jesus himself is present.³ In the gathered people, in the preached Word, and in the Lord's Supper, Christ is here with us, literally and absolutely present. We are doing all these thing this morning! and because of this, we know that Christ promises to be here with us, his Spirit present even now in this room. This is why we cannot give up our gathered worship, because it is here that we enter God's story, where we encounter his gospel of love and grace and are sent into our week reminded and worked by his Spirit, transformed by our gathering. Do you know this why we gather? Did you know that is why we are here this morning?

The late Eugene Peterson, reflecting on his congregation in the early days of their formation writes, "...we were a people of God gathered to worship God. The single word, "worship," defined what we were about. The congregational consensus emerged not so much by talking about it but by simply doing: worship was our signature activity, the distinctive act that set us apart from all other social structures—schools, businesses, athletic teams, political parties, government agencies... We simply met every

³ This was something he regularly discussed, but is found most specifically in his published doctoral work, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*.

Sunday and worshipped God. We sang together, prayed together, listened to scripture together, received the Sacraments [took communion and baptised] together... and went back to our homes ready to enter a week of work with blessing of God.”⁴ From this worship flows mission, transformation, and action, but it is this worship which is at the heart of everything we do.

The church and her people are a thirsty creature, parched by the wilderness and dryness secularism and false promises bring. The world dries up our souls and lives, evaporating beauty, peace, and purpose. It is here in the gathering were we experience the Spring of Life, the plentiful overflowing replenishment of the Scriptures to be quenched and filled up in our lives. We are a ‘creature of the Word.’

When we do this, we begin to cultivate these gifts and qualities of a godly character, and find ourselves in our various capacities of leadership and influence spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. Amen?

Paul calls Timothy to continue reading the Scriptures, to listen to the word, and also to stay accountable to the church—did you notice that? Look, in verse 15, Paul writes, “*Be diligent in these matters ... so that everyone may see your progress.*”

As John Dunne wrote, “No [person] is an island.” We need each other and we need to be sharpened in belief and life by one another. We cannot neglect meeting together because it is how we are formed for faithful Christian vocation and leadership, which is leadership by example. When we meet together, we are shaped by the word, shaped by each other, and ultimately shaped by the Spirit so that we may lead by love and example.

III. Leadership by Perseverance (v 12; 15-16)

There was something else that particularly struck me about this passage as I reflected on it this week. Often I feel as though that I have an implicit assumption that as long as I love God, am in the church, if things are going well, it should be kind of easy. Do you get that?

Yet, the assumption from Paul in this letter is that Timothy is going to run into trouble. If was not a case of, “oh yeah, this might work out or might not,” is was simply: no, there will be trouble. It was never a question of ‘if,’ but certainty: Christian leadership will bring trouble and so will require significant perseverance.

That word we looked at earlier from verse 15, *meletaō*, means to cultivate, to meditate on, but it also means *to give oneself wholly to*. I love the way the NASB translates this more literally: “Take pains with these things; be *absorbed* in them” (emphasis added). “Take pains with these things,” with pursuing godly character and continuing to meet under the Word. I think that is what we should expect the normal Christian life to look like, tough.

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 172.

There are many wrongs in the world which Christians are called to fight against; prejudice, sexism, racism, these are not the things of the kingdom, and we need to take a long hard look at ourselves in these issues both from our history and in our present.

Yet there is also something else much larger in reality of our world, etched in to the fabric of the universe. The world is broken on a cosmic level. It could be so easy of me, in times where leadership is hard or I face opposition, to remain self-righteous and indigent: “How dare they treat me like that! I can’t believe the way I’ve been wronged!” This may in fact be a true statement, and the whole world *could* be treating me badly, pushing me down because of silly reasons. Yet, my response is never to walk away, to pretend I am any better than anyone else, in fact to accept the things that I cannot change; in full acknowledgment that people in and outside the church will wrong me and in light of that I simply respond by pursuing a godly character, continuing to meet together and be formed under God’s Scripture, and to persevere in face of hardship.

Do you know how much of the New Testament is about perseverance? Not about changing circumstances, because the world is broken on a cosmic level, but simply choosing to follow Jesus?

This is not easy stuff to digest, but we must let it get deep within in us. We must be formed by the Bible and let our lives and vocational imaginations be shaped by this swirling truth of God.

So you young people at the back, don’t be discouraged because of your age, your lack of money or experience but pursue godly leadership and be formed by the Scriptures and God will do great things with you. Your life will be full.

And you older people in the front, do not imagine that God is done with you or that, even though society says the opposite, you do not have a richness and wisdom we desperately need to hear and share; pursue godly character and be formed by the Scriptures and God will do great things with you.

You teachers, you lawyers, you mechanics, you doctors, nurses, builders, tradies, pastors—all God’s people!—know that while you will face hard opposition in life, while you come up against people to do not treat you as you deserve, pursue godly character and be formed by the Scriptures so that God might move in your life mightily, and will see his gospel work and transform your lives and communities.

And it is rather fitting that after this meeting, we shall be gathering to discern and pursue God’s voice in the matter of a new senior pastor. In this time, might we aim to treat one another with love, faith, and purity, submitting to the Spirit of gentleness and peace. Might we watch ourselves closely and persevere in all matters for the glory of Christ.

And what do we do when you fail? When you strive to live up to these standards and applications yet do not succeed? Turn your heart towards the one who did not fail, the perfect leader and pioneer of the faith, Jesus our King. The truth is, as much as you and I must pursue these things and strive to live in

love and faith, there will be times where we lose our temper, slip our tongue, or hurt our neighbour. Know that in Him, all things are possible, and that in Him all faith, love, purity, speech, and conduct are made perfect and offered to us on our behalf. Isn't that good news? Let's pray.