

Success in Ministry

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[0 : 00] Let's stand as we honor the reading of God's Word together, 1 Timothy chapter 4, verses 6-11.

The Apostle Paul, writing to Timothy, a young pastor in Ephesus, says to him, Before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths.

Rather, train yourself for godliness. For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive because we have our hope set on the living God who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. Command and teach these things. May God have a blessing to the reading of His Word. Would you please be seated? The simplest way to measure success is through numerical indicators using numbers to evaluate how successful a person is. For example, if you are a student, your success is measured by test scores.

If you are an athlete, your success is measured by averages, percentages, and how many points you score.

[1 : 44] In your career, your success is often based on your performance and what you do to help the company be profitable. I could go on, but I think that you get the point. We base success off numbers.

And I'm not saying that that's a bad thing. Numbers report facts. But sometimes an athlete uses illegal performance-enhancing drugs. A student cheats. An employee works themselves to death, sacrificing their family for their career. And while the numbers may reveal success, they do so even though they've failed morally and spiritually to achieve it. People also tend to measure their success by comparison with others. If you're a student, that might look like you comparing your grades with someone else, comparing your awards, comparing your stats, comparing how many likes, friends, or interactions that you have on social media. For adults, that might look like comparing the size of your house or the size of your bank account with others. If you're a parent, it often looks like basing your success off of your children's achievements and then comparing their achievements to other children and their parents. Ministers of the gospel are tempted in the same ways.

A pastor's success is often measured by the size of the church, the size of the church's budget, the number of baptisms, number of speaking engagements, or how many books they've written.

They are likewise tempted to compare their ministry with other ministries. As pastors, we often joke about how we want to see revival take place in our church, but if it takes place in the church down the street instead of our own, we tend to feel unsuccessful and sorry for ourselves. When I first started pastoring, I replaced a man who had pastored for over 40 years combined. I was his associate pastor for one year before he retired, and the church called me to step into that role. And there was excitement during that time, but there was also concern. They went from a man with over 40 years of experience and who was a great pastor to a man with minimal experience. And some weren't as thrilled with that transition as others. One of them, wasn't afraid to express his concerns to my face. He anticipated that our numbers would go down.

And I honestly shared some of his concerns, but his comments upset me, and I wanted to prove him wrong. We had a board in the front of our sanctuary. Many of you guys probably remember those boards. Some churches still have them that record the previous week's tithe, the previous week's attendance, and compare it to the week before. I used that board every Sunday to measure my success. I would compare those numbers to previous numbers from previous years. If the numbers were up, I felt good. I felt like I was succeeding. If the numbers were down, I felt like a failure all week long. The Lord convicted me how I measure success, especially in ministry a long

time ago. But I still need reminding that the criteria that God uses to measure success is not based on numbers, but obedience. John Owen, the Puritan, said,

[5 : 34] In 1 Timothy 4, verses 6-11, the Apostle Paul, again inspired by the Holy Spirit, provides the criteria by which a ministry and a minister of the gospel should be evaluated. The criteria he provides help us to evaluate true success in ministry and answer the question which serves as the main idea for this morning's sermon.

How should we measure and evaluate success in ministry? How should we measure and evaluate success in ministry? Now you might be thinking, well, I'm not a minister and I'm not in ministry. Why is this important to me? It is important. A couple of weeks ago, we covered chapter 4, verses 1-5. In those verses, if you recall, Paul addresses the reality of false teachers whose teaching is inspired by demons. They are Satan's emissaries, wolves disguised in sheep's clothing who twist God's Word in ways that seek to lead people, God's people, to exchange the truth of God for a lie. Sometimes those counterfeits in the church are hard to detect, like Judas was. Sometimes their teaching is subtle. They use God's Word, though, to put heavy burdens on God's people by suggesting that if you don't follow all of these additional rules, then you're not saved or you're not saved enough. They add these rules and regulations that transform the gospel of grace to a gospel of good works, which is not the gospel that saves.

Christians must constantly then be on guard against these teachers and these teachings. We must use God's Word to evaluate their messages and their ministries using the criteria in our text this morning.

Now, if you do serve in some kind of ministry or teaching role in the church, the criteria Paul gives in this passage is criteria that you must use and trust to measure your success so that you continue to fight the good fight, detecting and refuting error as you seek to be a servant of the Lord who rightly handles his word. And if you're not a teacher, you still need to know these criteria because you need to be using it to evaluate me. You need to be using it to evaluate anyone who would fill this pulpit, anyone who would teach in a Sunday school class, no matter what the age of that group is. Because we want to make sure that everybody who is ministering in this church is doing so in a way that matches the criteria that we see laid out in our text this morning.

[8 : 38] You may be hearing you're an unbeliever. You're not only not in ministry, you're not a Christian. Well, the Bible tells us that many people have come, are coming, and will come in Jesus' name.

Jesus, again, said that it would happen. Many people twist his words, and they twist the truth to try to confuse you or deceive you into exchanging the truth of God for a lie.

And friend, we want you to know the truth. We want you to be set free from sin. We want you to be able to distinguish lies disguised as the truth. We want you to be saved.

We want you to be spared from eternity in hell. God has brought you here this morning to hear the truth, and I hope that today you'll believe it. So again, having discussed the inevitability of false teachers, Paul now instructs Timothy how to be and evaluate those suited to be a successful minister of the Lord in the face of demonic counterfeits and opposition. He does so by listing six criteria to answer the question. And now you might be thinking, six? He usually has three sermons. Is this a sermon that's going to be twice as long as normal? I don't plan for it to be. But there are six criteria that Paul gives to answer the question, how should we measure and evaluate success in ministry?

[10 : 18] The first comes from the middle portion of verse 6. A successful minister is a servant of Christ, or a servant of Jesus. A successful minister is a servant of Jesus. Again, Paul says there in the middle of verse 6, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus. And though again, though Paul doesn't start with that phrase, I think it's helpful to look at it first because it serves as a glue that holds all of these other criteria together. Paul calls Timothy to be a good servant of Jesus. He is never to forget his position in relation to Jesus. He is not to use Jesus as a means to achieve his own ends, but to be used by Jesus as a means to achieve his ends. He is to seek to be used of the Lord to build God's kingdom, not his own. He is to seek the spiritual prosperity of the Lord's people, not seek to use them and Jesus for his own material prosperity. I know in America we're familiar with the false teaching of the prosperity teachers and the prosperity gospel. It's heartbreaking to see how they use God's word to twist it and how they use people and deceive them to make a profit. And what's even more heartbreaking is when you go outside of America and you see how the prosperity gospel is spreading. So when I was in

India this past January, there was a large prosperity ministry and a really, I mean, a huge church that was led by a prosperity gospel. And what's even more sad is that most Christians in India belong to the lower caste. They have little money. They're very poor. And yet they're giving the little that they have to this man and to his ministry so that he can live in this ginormous house and have this ginormous building to continue to preach his lies. He and others used Jesus to profit financially from others.

After James and John asked their mommy to secure high positions next to Jesus in his kingdom, the other disciples heard it and they were indignant. They were furious. They got mad. And in Matthew 20 verses 24, Matthew records what happened next.

And when the tent heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and he said, you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. Now listen to this, but whoever would be great among you must be your servant. And whoever would be first among you must be as your slave. Even as the son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. A successful minister understands that they are the Lord's servant. And as such, they follow Jesus' example and they seek to be a servant of him by being a servant of all. Which going back to the beginning of verse 6 means that they serve the Lord's people by sharing God's word with them. So now the second criteria, a successful minister shares

God's word. So back to the beginning of verse 6, Paul says, if you put these things before the brothers. These things are the things that Paul warned about in verses 1 through 5 of chapter 4.

[14:16] Timothy is to warn of the danger of unbiblical demonic deception. He is to teach God's word. He is to explain God's word. He is to persuade God's people to obey God's word as he uses God's word to refute lies disguised as the truth. Paul talks about this in Ephesians chapter 4 verses 11 through 16.

There he speaks of God giving the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, and teachers to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ from whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped. When each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. A successful minister in a ministry is one who trusts the word of God and who rightly handle the word of God, which requires carefully preparing the teaching that they are going to share.

They want it to be pleasing to the Lord. They want it to be useful, to feed his people, his sheep, to equip them for the work of the ministry, to keep them grounded in biblical truth so that they aren't tossed around by Satan's deceitful schemes.

[16:04] So again, they are concerned at this point not with their growth and development so much, but to share the word of God rightly, understanding it, having bathed it in prayer so that they share it in a way that nourishes the Lord's people.

The third criteria, a successful minister studies the word of God. To share the word of God, well, you need to study the word of God. Verse 6, the end of verse 6, Paul says again, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.

To be, again, a good servant who shares God's word well, you must study God's word well. The phrase being trained accurately translates the present tense of the Greek verb.

The idea here for pastors, for ministers, is that you never reach a point where you think you don't need to be trained anymore, where you no longer need to study anymore, both in preparing your teaching and in your own devotional life.

I've noticed in sports, especially it seems in baseball, professional major league baseball, when an athlete is in their contract year, meaning the last year of their contract, they train harder, they work hard, they do so practicing more to put up better numbers in that season to cash in on a large contract and a better payday.

[17:42] Sometimes when they get the guaranteed money, their level of performance afterwards diminishes because in their mind they think, I've got what I want, I've arrived, I've achieved my goal.

And I think in vocational ministry, pastors can be tempted to think the same way once they finish seminary. Either they think that they know enough or in some cases they think they know it all. I remember the first day of orientation for my doctorate and we were told that as it concerned the academic and scholarly realm, we weren't experts.

We knew nothing and our opinions didn't matter. We couldn't say anything, no matter how obviously true it was, without citing a scholarly source.

Some of you have commented to me that I use a lot of Scripture when I preach and that is by design. I want you to see that I'm not sharing my opinions, but biblical facts based on biblical truth. [19 : 03] The better you study God's Word, the better you know God's Word, and the more useful of a servant you will be to the Master. The best teachers are those who are consistently taught by the best teacher.

In John 14, Jesus prepared his disciples for the coming of the Holy Spirit and he told them, verses 25 through 26, These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you, but the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will do all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

It was the disciples' job to record the Holy Spirit's words, which comprise the Bible. It is our job to immerse ourselves in studying, understanding, and applying God's Word.

And if you are a teacher, sharing these sacred truths. And so, one thing I would encourage you to do if you are a teacher or if you preach ever, or if you will do that one day, is to begin, before you study, with prayer.

And do this all the time even when you read the Bible. Pray before you read. and ask the Holy Spirit to teach you, to help you understand, and in helping you to understand, to convict you of sin, especially if you're going to proclaim that truth that you're reading to others.

[20 : 38] So now the fourth criteria, successful minister shuns false teaching. The flip side of the result of studying God's Word is being able to detect and avoid false teaching.

In the beginning of verse 7, Paul says, have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. While studying God's Word is essential to a healthy, spiritual diet, so is rejecting teachings that are irreverent, silly myths.

In the case of the church in Ephesus, false teachers were offering them spiritual junk food. They were overlaying biblical truths with additional restrictions like abstaining from certain foods and not getting married.

They proclaimed that these additional restrictions were necessary for salvation, that they would bring people closer to God when in reality they were teachings inspired by demons designed to draw people away from God, not closer to God.

silly superstitions that tempt us and teach us to put our faith in things rather than God. And sometimes religious people can be the silliest of all with the myths and the superstitions that they have.

[22 : 00] A good friend of mine growing up, later in life we reconnected and he and his wife had a house that they wanted to sell. He grew up Catholic.

And so he was telling us how, you know, it wasn't selling and they needed it to sell so they could buy another house and so there was a saint, I don't even know the name of this saint, but what they were going to do was get a statue of this saint and they were going to bury it upside down in their front yard.

And somehow that works to sell houses. but I'm thinking, I don't ever recall reading that in the Bible. You know, maybe somewhere in first or second hesitations, thou shalt buy statues and bury them upside down in your house if you want it to sell.

And I was just thinking, imagine the neighbors seeing, you know, someone doing this and digging a hole and putting a statue in it and covering that hole and how crazy that would be.

That kind of superstitious faith, it's not really faith and it does not communicate biblical truth about the sovereignty of God. And Paul's not, I think, here talking about silly myths like the ones that we have in our culture, but that's applicable here like horoscopes, enneagrams, psychics, fortune tellers, sometimes even a gut feeling.

[23 : 37] I have a gut feeling. Anything that contradicts God's word should not be trusted. Nothing should suppress or supplant our faith in God.

And if you have a house to sell, don't let us see you burying something in your front yard. I hope you don't have an idea. Just pray about it. Number five, a successful minister seeks godliness.

A successful minister seeks godliness. The rest of verse 7 to verse 10. Paul says, rather train yourself for godliness for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come for this saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance.

So Paul here is using an argument from the lesser to the greater because the Bible says that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and that we should be mindful of our physical health, that it is a good thing to treat our bodies well and to watch our diet and to exercise.

These are good things. So Paul's not saying here that physical fitness is a bad thing. He knows it's of value. The Ephesians know it's of value but of greater value he's saying is spiritual fitness because these bodies aren't eternal.

[25 : 04] They're perishable but our souls are eternal. That's true for believers and unbelievers.

your soul is eternal. You will live in eternity either in heaven or in hell forever.

That's worth thinking about. I encourage you to think about that. But again Paul uses the present tense when he talks about training in the pursuit of godliness.

Godliness is a right attitude and a right response towards God. It's a preoccupation with who he is and a desire a striving a wanting to be more like him which means obeying him which means putting sin to death in our lives.

In 1 Timothy chapter 6 verse 3 Paul says of godliness that it's at the heart of truth. In verse 11 of chapter 6 Paul says it is something true believers in Jesus pursue.

[26 : 21] In 2 Peter 1 3 Peter says that godliness is something that comes through saving faith in Jesus Christ and then he adds in chapter 3 verses 10 through 13 that godliness is the greatest pursuit of all because the day of the Lord when he returns will come like a thief and then the heavens will pass away with a roar and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved and the earth and the works that are done in it will be exposed.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn but according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

In other words since these realities are realities they are coming things don't waste your life in the present pursuing perishable things but spending your days in the present in preparation for eternity. Successful ministers discipline themselves in the present in light of these future realities. They devote themselves to spiritual disciplines. They constantly train themselves by studying God's word.

This is true not just of ministers but of all Christians understanding God's word obeying God's word and sharing God's word as Paul notes in verse 10 for to this end we toil and strive because we have our hope set on the living God who is the savior of all people especially those who believe.

[28 : 16] Remember those staples commercials with the easy button? If only life was really like that if ever I wanted a commercial to be true in life it might be that staples commercial you could just press a button and all the toil and all the striving would go away or if only the toil and the striving was like the training montages in the Rocky movies you know what I'm talking about Rocky's you know he's been down now he's back up and he's ready to train for the big fight and for the next three minutes you see Rocky training and hitting pieces of meat and lifting you know lumber on his head and doing all this crazy stuff and you see him sweating and his muscles bulging and by the end he's ready to go and fight and if only all of that training that it takes for us in toil and striving if it could just happen in like three minutes and we could wash it back and be like yeah I did that there are no easy buttons there are no mantages like that for us

Jesus is our example and Jesus didn't take the easy way out for you for us he actually physically bore!

the cross he actually physically died on the cross he actually physically and spiritually endured the father's wrath for our sins on the cross the easy way out for him would have been to just let us remain dead in our sins and endure the punishment that we all deserve like the call to faith in Christ the call to ministry is a dying to self in 1 Corinthians 15 31 Paul talks about how he dies daily and he wasn't afraid to put his life at risk to be an effective minister of Jesus we want to read what he wrote

to the Corinthians there in chapter 11 verses 23 through 29 are they servants of Christ I'm a better one I'm talking like a madman with far greater labors far more imprisonments with countless beatings and often near death five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one three times

I was beaten with rods once I was stoned three times I was shipwrecked a night and a day I was adrift at sea on frequent journeys in danger from robbers danger from my own people danger from Gentiles danger city danger in the wilderness danger at sea danger from false brothers in toil and hardship through many a sleepless night in hunger and thirst often without food in cold and exposure and apart from other things there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all of the churches who is weak and I am not weak who is made to fall and I am not indignant why would Paul toil and strive as he did he tells us in one place Philippians 121 for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain and what is true of Paul should be true of ministers it should be true of all Christians as he says in Philippians 129 through a few verses later for it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have ministry is hard work but it has been granted to us to toil and to strive for what is eternal God has put it in our hearts to know this and I've seen it here many times and in some cases I've seen it in our church work days we come together and we've done hard things that required hard work some of us got scratched and scraped and sore and a little bit beat up but the end of the work the results bring joy don't they we're able to see what we did together and then when we go home the aching muscles it's a good kind of ache you know what I'm talking about we were out Danny and I doing some yard work the other day and she was sore and she came in and she said you know

[32 : 49] I'm really sore but it's good it feels good that's what it's like to serve Christ there's toil there's striving there's a struggle but it's good it makes us more like Jesus acting like Jesus successful ministers are those who strive because they know that no matter what the numbers say Jesus keeps better accounts now at the end of verse 10 Paul says that God is the savior of all people especially those who believe some commentators debate over the meaning but it's really straightforward in light of the rest of scripture which tells us that all people are sinners and Jesus is the only one who can save people from their sins in that sense he is the one savior through whom sinners can be saved and he's especially the savior of those who know that he's the savior having trusted in him savingly having repented of their sins having turned to him in faith and trusting in him when he said on the cross it is finished that he meant it and that it's a reality that it truly is finished that Jesus died for their sins that he rose from the grave on the third day just as he said and that he's coming back now the sixth criteria successful ministers speak with authority successful ministers speak with authority and verse 11 again

Paul says command and teach these things successful ministers don't water down God's word they don't soften the edge of God's word word they don't present his truth as optional they speak with authority not their own authority but with the Lord's authority they present biblical truth and they don't present it with just a take it or leave it mentality this is what this says good luck in my defense with Monty and Andy my readers I think it was Andy who asked me if you could just pick one verse so you have to pick a series of passages to say that based from the Bible this is why this thing that I'm doing is worth doing if you could just pick one passage which would it be and for me no doubt it's 2nd Timothy chapter 4 verses 1 through 2nd

Paul says successful ministers trust that God's word will not return to him void they obey his commands because they seek godliness themselves they teach his commands with authority because they're convinced that his word is the truth that his ways are true and they desire to see his kingdom advance and so when they teach they don't just say hey this is one thing and here's the other thing they teach and they say go this way do this thing this is the way the Lord wants you to go don't go that way it's better to go that way no you say you stand in the way of the bad way you say go that way go that way you're going to have to get over my dead body to go that way they willingly toil and strive as servants not seeking a pat on the back but to hear him say to them one day well done good and faithful what servant enter into the joy of your master so how do we adjust compared to what we've heard use

God's standard to measure and evaluate success in ministry use God's word to measure and evaluate success in ministry use God's word to measure and evaluate everything use it to evaluate those whom you would listen to use it as you teach God's word be like the Bereans in Acts chapter

17 who Paul shares the gospel with and they say hey that sounds good we're going to go back and look in God's word and we're going to see if what you say matches if what you say fits and if it doesn't fit throw it out and have nothing to do with it and also teacher whatever ministry you're in here somewhere else don't think that you're a failure because your Sunday school class isn't growing or your ministry isn't growing or your group isn't as big as somebody else's group seek godliness seek to be used of the Lord to help his people pursue godliness do this and you will be a good servant of the

Lord Jesus Christ let's pray Lord we thank you that you being the eternal God who is and was and who forever will be descended to this earth that you've created adding a human nature to your divine nature living the sinless life that we could not live to willingly die on the cross for the sins that we've committed being a servant and setting an example of service for us God forgive us for how we sometimes neglect your word forgive us how we sometimes know your word but neglect obeying your word and God help us here in our church and in your church your body to be ministers who don't measure our success based off of what the world says but based upon our obedience to you that

[39 : 25] God we would be bold and we would be courageous not just in teaching your word but as believers in sharing your gospel and we pray Lord that as a result of that though there's toiling and there's striving though there's aches and pains that come with teaching and proclaiming and sharing that Lord we would know that it's good that we would make it our life's goal to serve you well as your servant in anticipation of that day when we hope to hear you say to us well done good and faithful servant enter into the joy of your master until then Lord may we toil and strive to accomplish your will that you would be pleased with us that you would be glorified through our efforts we ask this in Jesus name amen!

to