

## Inspiring example

There are two ways to measure a person's character: actions and words. I list actions first because words require practical expression. Paul addresses both areas forcefully because he



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understands that the world of the Roman Empire will pay no attention to this new Christ-centered religion if believers do not consistently model their faith by their teachings and actions.

G.K. Chesterton, in his book *What's Wrong with the World*, assessed our weakness: "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."

Although Paul is teaching young Timothy how to be a good pastor, his advice is on target for all of us who profess to follow Christ. These words do not presume a checklist for success or failure based on corporate policies, but our need to follow Jesus' words and example with God's help.

I began preaching at 17 and pastored my first church at 21. The mistakes I made! Thank God for gracious men and women who loved me, advised me and taught me by example. I learned that love and patience could foster cooperation and change, that sermons were usually more powerful when backed by concern and respect for people, that leadership is earned, not forced, and that one person is not always right!

Paul uses physical activity as a metaphor of the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 9 he talks about running the race or competing in a boxing match. He tells Timothy the Christ life is "work and struggle" (v. 10) and "focus on working on your own development and what you teach" (v. 16, CEB). This is preceded by a forceful "Train yourself for a holy life!" (v. 7).

We have no clear evidence that Timothy's age was an issue in Ephesus

except "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young" (v. 12). It's as though Paul wants that idea out of the way as he moves on to what Pastor Timothy (and all of us) must do: "Set an example for the believers through your speech, behavior, love, faith, and by being sexually pure" (v. 12).

The mention of sexual purity most likely refers to the dominant thinking of this port city of Ephesus, where pagan religion and prostitution overlapped. But given the sexual scandals, child pornography and rising divorce rates of our day, this advice is still needed. Paul's behavior checklist for any leader is broad, reaching beyond the surface issues of "speech and behavior" to the heart of a person with "love and faith" (v. 12). One of my seminary classmates dropped out of school because he was very adept in minor points of doctrine but he did not like people.

The gospel begins and ends with God's love, which shapes our actions and relationships. We must always measure ourselves by Jesus, for we learn from him how to pray, share God's love, minister to the hurting and outcast, forgive and apply God's written word to our lives. We are to "command" and "teach," not our ideas or standards, but all that comes from "the living God, who is Savior of all people, especially those who believe" (v. 10). I interpret that last phrase, "especially those who believe," as pointing back to Timothy and any other person in a positive ministry.

Ministry is a heavy responsibility that must never be treated casually, whether the person is formally ordained or not. Paul mentions the spiritual gift of ministry that was formally declared (prophecy) when "the elders laid hands on" him (v. 14). This was long before ordination committees, denominational credentials and ethics boards existed to certify and manage ministers.

This is why people like Paul and the Apostles in Jerusalem were

## Formations

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Scripture: 1 Timothy 4:7b-16

so important. The emphases on exemplary behavior and sound doctrine were (and must continue to be) "visible to all" (v. 15). Paul's language is firm: "practice...live by" (v.15); "focus on working on your own development" (v. 16). There is a hint at self-care here. Godly leadership requires a desire and commitment to grow in Christ, to learn more from the biblical texts, to grow in faith.

When I retired I cleaned out years of files and sermon notes, discovering some things I wish I had never preached or taught! As the years passed, I grew in faith, deepened in knowledge and discovered better ways to minister. We never stop learning if we stay focused on the Bible and sensitive to the Holy Spirit's teaching. In a society obsessed with fitness programs, it is good to remember "training in holy living is useful for everything (all of life)" (v. 7).

So, how are you doing with the spiritual workouts? Are you motivated? Our book market is flooded with CD's and computer programs focused on spiritual development. Growing in Christ requires inner motivation and the desire to live a faithful witness for Christ.

We live in a wonderful day of possibilities. There are many good Bible translations and abundant Scripture studies that will enrich you without requiring you to have a working knowledge of Hebrew or Greek.

Let Paul's words to Timothy encourage you to do the hard work, keep growing in faith and be available to be an encourager and friend to others on the pilgrimage of discipleship.

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*Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.*