

GUIDELINES

BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S
MINISTRY AND MISSION

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Edited by Rachel Tranter and Olivia Warburton

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Suggestions for using *Guidelines*

Set aside a regular time and place, if possible, when and where you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and, if you find it helpful, use the BRF Ministries prayer on page 6.

In *Guidelines*, the introductory section provides context for the passages or themes to be studied, while the units of comment can be used daily, weekly or whatever best fits your timetable. You will need a Bible (more than one if you want to compare different translations) as Bible passages are not included. Please don't be tempted to skip the Bible reading because you know the passage well. We will have utterly failed if we don't bring our readers into engagement with the word of God. At the end of each week is a 'Guidelines' section, offering further thoughts about, or practical application of, what you have been studying.

Occasionally, you may read something in *Guidelines* that you find particularly challenging, even uncomfortable. This is inevitable in a series of notes which draws on a wide spectrum of contributors and doesn't believe in ducking difficult issues. Indeed, we believe that *Guidelines* readers much prefer thought-provoking material to a bland diet that only confirms what they already think.

If you do disagree with a contributor, you may find it helpful to go through these three steps. First, think about why you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this is an idea that is new to you, or you are not happy about the way something has been expressed. Or there may be something more substantial – you may feel that the writer is guilty of sweeping generalisation, factual error, or theological or ethical misjudgement. Second, pray that God would use this disagreement to teach you more about his word and about yourself. Third, have a deeper read about the issue. There are further reading suggestions at the end of each writer's block of notes. And then, do feel free to write to the contributor or the editor of *Guidelines*. We welcome communication, by email, phone or letter, as it enables us to discover what has been useful, challenging or infuriating for our readers. We don't always promise to change things, but we will always listen and think about your ideas, complaints or suggestions. Thank you!

To send feedback, please email enquiries@brf.org.uk, phone +44 (0)1865 319700 or write to the address shown opposite.

Writers in this issue

M. J. Kramer is chaplain of Keble College, Oxford, having previously served as precentor of Canterbury Cathedral. His academic interests include classics, biblical studies and Hellenistic Judaism. He is also author of *The Canterbury Book of New Parish Prayers*.

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Olivia Warburton is co-editor of *Guidelines*. Formerly head of content creation and Living Faith ministry lead for BRF Ministries, she has worked in a number of editorial roles.

David Spriggs has been a Baptist minister for over 50 years. As well as national roles with the Evangelical Alliance and Bible Society, he has worked in six local churches, written a number of books and has a wife, three children and ten grandchildren.

Walter Moberly is Emeritus Professor of Theology and Biblical Interpretation at Durham University. He has recently written *Old Testament Theology*, *The Bible in a Disenchanted Age* and *The God of the Old Testament* (Baker Academic).

Tim Welch is lead chaplain at Cheltenham and Gloucester YMCA, and research fellow at Bristol Baptist College where he previously served as Director of Ministerial Formation. Tim is married to Rachel, and they live in Cheltenham.

Miriam Bier Hinksman is an Anglican priest in the diocese of Canterbury, as well as a biblical scholar, teacher, preacher, and writer. Her most recent work is *Reading Hosea: A beginner's guide* (Grove, 2023).

Tanya Marlow is a writer, speaker and lecturer who specialises in biblical narrative and honest theologies of disability and suffering. Her books include *Those Who Wait*, and you can download her first book for free at TanyaMarlow.com.

The editors write...



Olivia writes:

I've loved being *Guidelines* editor alongside Rachel for the past four years – where did the time go? – and I celebrate every issue that has been published in that time; every contributor who has explored and explained God's word for us. New full-time working commitments mean that I no longer have adequate time available to nurture and develop *Guidelines* in the way it deserves, but I am leaving it in Rachel's capable hands to take forward.

I want to say a heartfelt thankyou to all our readers for your partnership with us; for your invariably helpful, encouraging and challenging feedback; and above all for your desire for *Guidelines* to be a place of encounter with God. I wish you every blessing as you continue to ask, seek and receive.

Rachel writes:

Olivia and I have been editing *Guidelines* together since 2021. She has brought so much enthusiasm, wisdom, clear-headedness and encouragement to *Guidelines*, and I can't thank her enough for all of her contributions. It's a daunting task to continue to commission and edit by myself, but we have a superb group of contributors who make it very easy to take joy in the whole process.

For this issue, I'm delighted to introduce Rachael Newham, who writes movingly and frankly about a theology of mental health. It's also a pleasure to welcome back Henry Wansbrough, who last wrote in 2023. We have a host of other contributors for this issue, all of whom write brilliantly on their chosen topic. It is fitting, too, that Olivia leaves us with her wise and sensitive thoughts on Malachi as we celebrate her final issue with us.

Times of endings are always, inevitably, times of new beginnings as well. As we thank Olivia for her time working on *Guidelines*, we also look with expectation, joy and thankfulness to the future, and all that God will say in this new season.

With every blessing,

Rachel

Olivia

The prayer of BRF Ministries

*Faithful God,
thank you for growing BRF Ministries
from small beginnings
into the worldwide family it is today.
We rejoice as young and old
discover you through your word
and grow daily in faith and love.
Keep us humble in your service,
ambitious for your glory
and open to new opportunities.
For your name's sake.
Amen.*

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Ecclesiastes



M. J. Kramer

'Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher... All is vanity' (Ecclesiastes 1:2). The difficulty of interpreting Ecclesiastes is reflected in the fact that even the book's famous slogan is almost impossible to translate definitively. The word traditionally rendered 'vanity' (*hebel*) derives from a root meaning 'vapour/breath', but in virtually every case it has a more metaphorical meaning and can describe nothingness, futility, senselessness, transitoriness, emptiness and absurdity. What's more, the exact connotations of the term seem to vary across its multiple uses in the short text of Ecclesiastes. Perhaps this is only too appropriate for a word whose origins lie with a force – vapour, breath – that cannot be clearly seen or pinned down, an original physical meaning Ecclesiastes keeps active by repeatedly pairing *hebel* with the expression 'chasing after wind'.

This vapour-like, breathy elusiveness of Ecclesiastes' writing has often been a source of frustration to the book's readers, who seek to know what exactly its provocative author believes about God and human life. This frustration has led commentators to attempt to reconstruct a constructive argument from Ecclesiastes' more meandering form of expression, where each proposition emerges only to be dissolved into vapour, as it is replaced by another that often contradicts the first.

In these reflections, I want to suggest that we can get more out of this fascinating book by allowing ourselves to be blown around by the changing directions of Ecclesiastes' windy writing, rather than by trying to penetrate through it to uncover the stable convictions of a putative more systematic thinker. If we allow ourselves to do that, we will find ourselves emerging from our encounter with this book with a vision of human life that is more richly complicated – less clearly understood, perhaps, but also more fully explored.

Bible quotations are taken from the NRSV.

1 What's the point?

Ecclesiastes 1

To understand Ecclesiastes, we need to start halfway through the book's first chapter, after the opening poem has finished. In verses 12–18, we find a deliberate accumulation of first-person Hebrew verbs: 'I applied... I saw... I said... I applied... I perceived.' These remind us, as the character of the Teacher begins to speak in his own voice, that his objective is to draw us into his own particular perspective, his own stream of consciousness.

This can create a problem. Many of us are so accustomed to expect every Bible text to deliver a 'message' that we want to jump ahead, understand the Teacher's point and apply it to our lives today. But be warned! Those who try to do that with Ecclesiastes either find themselves tangled up in this text's contradictions or just prioritising the verses that accord with their preferred beliefs and ignoring the others.

The starting point of understanding Ecclesiastes is proclaimed in all those 'I's. The purpose of this book is not necessarily to present an objective message, but to give us a flavour of a particular subjective thought process. So perhaps it's better to approach Ecclesiastes less as a work of theology – addressing the question of 'how things *are*' – and more as a work of spirituality – 'how things *feel*'.

The subjectivity of the Teacher's 'take' on life can be seen at work in the opening poem (vv. 4–11). The succession of one generation to another and the reliable circularity of nature, to other eyes, might be a source of reassurance or even of wonder. Yet to the Teacher it is a source of tedium and pointlessness. There is 'nothing new under the sun' (v. 9), a point reinforced by the laboriously repeated Hebrew word-roots *hllk* (go) and *sbb* (return), which together make up around half of the words in verse 6.

For those of us tempted towards prioritising the stable and impersonal abstractions of doctrine, Ecclesiastes 1 reminds us that true theology is always embodied, and so – like the wind and the sun and the streams and the generations – it is always on the move, ebbing and flowing, because that movement is the nature of life. That is the nature of breath (*ruah*, *hebel*).

2 Experiments with hedonism

Ecclesiastes 2

Most of us want to be happy, and there is much in the Teacher's test of pleasure (v. 1) that sounds familiar. Not only has the Teacher tried the traditional youthful expedients of sex (v. 8c), drugs (v. 3), and rock and roll (v. 8b), but he has also experimented with rather more middle-aged pleasures: home-ownership (v. 4), gardening (vv. 5–6) and even a walk in the park (v. 5). Try as he might, however – try as we might – none of these really bring satisfaction. So the Teacher's lament that sometimes it just feels like a lot of wasted effort (v. 11) might sound all too familiar as well.

Now, it might be tempting here to leap in with a conventional conclusion, and perhaps Ecclesiastes is trying to encourage us to do so. *I get it – all the pleasures of life are empty. What we need to do is focus on God!* But if we give into that temptation, we are soon going to get a nasty surprise. Verses 13–14a at first sound very conventional. Indeed, the idea that wisdom trumps all the pleasures that we heard about in verses 1–11 would not have sounded out of place in the book of Proverbs.

It is what comes next that is the kicker. Wisdom exceeds folly as light exceeds darkness... but ultimately the same fate of death awaits fool and wise man alike. In the end, wisdom is no more the answer than wealth, or status, or alcohol – a seriously subversive statement indeed, especially when we remember that Ecclesiastes 1:1 identifies the Teacher as King Solomon, a man who was famously praised by God for praying for wisdom to discern what is right instead of 'long life or riches, or for the life of [his] enemies' (1 Kings 3:11).

In the end, it seems, there is no answer. The only consolation is to snatch what pleasure you can in food and drink and work (v. 24), before that too is taken from you.

The nihilistic outlook of this chapter might seem unappealing. Yet it is good to be reminded that our moments of despair do find a home within the biblical text itself. What's more, the failure of the Teacher's experiment, with its insistent 'I made... for myself' repetitions, reminds us that sometimes we have to accept that we can't always manufacture or force our own happiness.

In the end, perhaps there's more to life than being happy.

3 The great contradiction

Ecclesiastes 3

The opening verses of Ecclesiastes 3 are some of the most famous, and perhaps some of the most beautiful, in the Bible, with their lilting rhythm and their soothing, balanced repetitions. As they are often read at funerals, they have helped countless people to come to terms with the fact that sorrow, mourning and death are as much a part of our existence as joy, laughter and life.

Yet these lines are not the totality of chapter 3. Indeed, they are only really its introduction. For the nub of Ecclesiastes' thinking in this chapter comes in verse 11. '[God] has made everything suitable for its time; moreover [an emphatic *gam* in Hebrew] he has put [*'olam*] into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from beginning to the end.' The Hebrew *'olam* is hard to translate. Often meaning world/everything/eternity, the NRSV paraphrases the word accurately for this context to mean 'a sense of past and future.'

In other words, human existence is in a constant state of tension. In one sense, as we live them out each day, our lives are cyclical, seasonal, repetitive, and this is something in which we can find refuge and, perhaps, consolation. Yet, in another sense, we have a need implanted deep within us to make sense of the *'olam*, the whole, the past and the future, a quest which the Teacher believes often leads us to desolation, and which is nonetheless inevitable.

When giving guidance to people who are struggling, I often encourage them to make sure they balance *coping* with *thinking about things*, advising them to make a space for grief or questioning, but also a space for doing the activities that can give them a break from all that. For Ecclesiastes, however, these two dimensions of life are active not only in the difficult times, but always. Humans must live with the contradictions of embracing our temporality while also engaging with our longing to understand the whole, eternal story.

Ecclesiastes 3, then, demonstrates the complexity but also the profundity of the Teacher's understanding of the human condition. To be human, for Ecclesiastes, is to experience the paradoxes of a life which is at once cyclical and linear, consoling and desolating, momentary and integral, fleshly and intellectual, knowing that, in the end, this wonderful bundle of paradoxes will unravel into the simplicities of earth, and breath, and dust.

4 What are we really looking for?

Ecclesiastes 4:1—5:7

Why do we go out to work in the morning? Most of us would usually respond to that question: to pay the bills, or, if we're lucky, because I love my job. But for the writer of Ecclesiastes, who is always keen to probe into the darker and more repressed corners of the human heart, the reality is that all work, all toil and all skill ultimately comes from a place of envy (4:4). What drives us to labour and to earn is a jealous desire of what others possess and the competitive instinct to have the same or, even better, more – stuff, status or leisure – than them.

We might not like that reflection, but if you are reading this, it's likely that you do indeed have more income than is required for basic subsistence, and Ecclesiastes might productively lead you honestly to ask yourself the question: *why?*

One result of Ecclesiastes' musings on work is something like the modern concept of the work–life balance (v. 6), but more interesting is his application of this ethic of resisting over-busyness to our relationship with God.

The first seven verses of chapter 5 are the only really extended treatment of the relationship of humanity to God in Ecclesiastes. So some readers tend to latch on to these verses to reclaim this problematic author for orthodoxy, by arguing that this passage, structurally 'central' in the text, shows that the solution to the emptiness of life is a conventional, obedient piety.

In reality, though, these verses have more the character of a warning than an exhortation to closer engagement with the divine. Indeed, in this pessimistic context, I'm inclined to read 5:5 quite literally: it is actually better not to get involved at all with holy vows, than to risk God's wrath for messing one up.

Read alongside the passage on toil, then, this cultic passage is equally provocative. What are we really looking for in a relationship with God? Have we turned our faith into another form of toil? Is our church-life becoming another form of busyness, or even rivalry? Perhaps sometimes we need simply to guard our steps and keep silence, and be reminded that the transcendent God is not something to be coopted as another instrument for our cultivation, manipulation and competitiveness.

5 Life in an uncertain universe

Ecclesiastes 7:1–25

Ecclesiastes 7 takes its reader on a disorientating intellectual journey. Its opening line seems reassuringly conventional at first: ‘A good name is better than precious ointment.’ Its apparent universal relevance is highlighted by an elegant play on words, as the Hebrew word for ‘name’ and ‘ointment’ are similar (*tob shem mi* and *shemen tob*). Finally, the reader might think, Ecclesiastes is returning to the familiar ethics of the wisdom tradition. Relax!

This conventional introduction, however, is only a tease. The immediate parallel to the opening conventional proverb is far more disturbing: the day of death is better than the day of birth. The sequence of maxims that follow mix the conventional (v. 5) with the topsy-turvy (v. 3), with dizzying effect. The reader who tries to keep up with this rapidly oscillating perspective is left more confused than enlightened – and perhaps this is precisely the point. As Seow (p. 246) puts it, ‘the realities of life are simply too contradictory to be governed by axioms.’ Perhaps the traditional wisdom project is doomed to fail.

What is even more provocative than this diagnosis of cosmic confusion is that Ecclesiastes advocates a revolutionary approach to life in this uncertain world (vv. 16–18). The ‘Goldilocks’ suggestion that we should aim to be neither be too good nor too wicked is a radical departure from the conventional religious morality that we should seek to be completely ‘holy’ (Leviticus 19:2) or ‘perfect’ (Matthew 5:48) and beg for divine forgiveness when we fail.

Theologically objectionable as it may be, however, there is something refreshingly honest about Ecclesiastes’ realism that nobody is so righteous as never to sin (v. 20), and something potentially liberating about his suggestion that a degree of self-understanding, acceptance, and maybe even humour, might have a role to play in our response to our sins as well as the traditional exhortations to self-flagellation. Even if we are not willing to go so far, we might still see the value of a degree of reserve and provisionality about all our claims, actions and commitments in this complex world. Maybe acknowledging, rather than repressing, the compromises we make each day is a legitimate part of a holy – and healthy – life.

6 Dust to dust

Ecclesiastes 11—12

The contradictions of Ecclesiastes continue all the way through to the very end of the book. Indeed, in these final two chapters they intensify. We are to rejoice in the light of life, yet remember darkness and vanity (11:7–8); we are to rejoice in youth (11:9) and the good creation of God, but to remember the pains of old age (12:1–7); we are encouraged to banish anxiety from our minds (11:10), only to be told how much we have to be anxious about!

To the end, then, the text of Ecclesiastes maintains the ebb and flow of a work of spirituality, rather than settling down with the resolution of a work of doctrinal theology. Indeed, the text's love of paradox is not so different from the apparently contradictory descriptions of spiritual experience that echo throughout mystical literature – sober drunkenness, sweet pain, dazzling darkness – albeit, for Ecclesiastes, life's paradoxes are more intellectual than emotional in nature.

Ecclesiastes' final enigma, though, is expressed through a sophisticated manipulation of form. The explicit concern of the sentence that begins in 12:1 is the injunction to remember the creator in one's youth. The temporal subclause ('before...') however, is extended to such a degree that the original main clause is long forgotten in a heap of images that speak of old age and the end of life. In typically contradictory fashion, a verse that purports to encourage a focus on the moment of youth ends up tangled in a preoccupation with life's end, in a web of images whose expressive virtuosity and fecundity clashes with the dying away they purport to describe.

This highly poetic section forms an eloquent 'first ending' to the book. It leads not to a triumphant resolution, 'Q.E.D.', but rather a fizzling out in a string of disconnected images, fading to nothing, like a human life, melting away, into the chaotic dust and breath from which it first took on form.

A more definite final boundary is provided by 12:8–14. Often thought to 'correct' a sceptical thinker by imposing a more conventional, moralistic message, these verses can be read more functionally as drawing us out of the subjective consciousness of Ecclesiastes, to return us to our own everyday world. This is a return which leaves open the question of where the restless spirit that we have seen blow through this text might lead us next on our own spiritual journey.

Guidelines

If we read Ecclesiastes as a work of spirituality rather than theology, it seems right to conclude by considering how the book reflects your own spiritual and life experience. The book's complexity (not to say obscurity) has allowed its interpreters to combine its text with their own preoccupations, theologies and personal experiences, to produce a rich kaleidoscope of interpretations of this poetic masterpiece. These questions encourage you, like them, to bring your own self into dialogue with this ancient text.

Questions for reflection:

- How do your feelings about life compare to Ecclesiastes? Do you resonate with the tension between meaninglessness and enjoying simple pleasures?
- What do you do to 'make yourself happy' and does it work? When it doesn't, how do you cope?
- Does Ecclesiastes' suggestion not to be too righteous or too wicked make sense? Can it be reconciled with traditional Christian teaching, or your personal faith?
- What drives you to work, or to go on living, or to engage with God? Has reading Ecclesiastes changed your view about any of this?

FURTHER READING

Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Baker Academic, 2014).

Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes* (Eerdmans, 2011).

Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up* (Wipf & Stock, 2010).

Arthur Jan Keefer, *Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life in the Ancient World* (CUP, 2022).

Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Eerdmans, 1998).

T. A. Perry, *The Book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) and the Path to Joyous Living* (CUP, 2015).

Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (Yale UP, 2007).

1 and 2 Timothy



Stephanie Addenbrooke Bean

The two letters to Timothy from Paul are endearing messages of encouragement from a seasoned leader to a seemingly nervous one just beginning his ministry. But there are principles contained here for all of us, no matter our stage of faith or level of leadership. I have outlined in the subsequent notes Paul's guiding principles for a life of discipleship from these epistles, identifying twelve practices for solidifying our faith and witness to those around us.

Paul is particularly aware of false teachers and the damage they can do, and how easy it can be for them to infiltrate Christian communities. Scholars debate the identity of these external threats (as posed to Paul when he was writing), but it is not difficult for us to see the applicability of his message today.

As you read 1 and 2 Timothy over the next two weeks, I urge you to consider how you may heed Paul's advice so that you too can say in your final days that you 'fought the good fight' (2 Timothy 4:7) before resting with Christ in 'eternal glory' (2 Timothy 2:10).

Bible quotations are taken from the NIV.

1 Defending truth

1 Timothy 1:1–11

After pleasantries and introductions, Paul tells Timothy to stay in Ephesus. I used to be confused by this, presuming that Paul would want his ‘best leaders’ to continue his work of mission by travelling far and wide to spread the gospel. But as I have studied 1–2 Timothy more closely, I have been reminded of the usefulness of remaining in one place, particularly as it relates to combating false doctrine and defending truth. I have found that the most effective evangelism strategies come from building relationships and seeking to understand the place God has put us. Having one foot out of the door helps no one. Besides, if the true goal of teaching truth is love, as Paul indicates in verse 5, how can we develop such love if we are always seeking to move on? Perhaps defending the truth of the gospel is less about apologetics but instead about building loving relationships.

Paul writes that false doctrine is driven by selfish ambition more so than lack of understanding or being confused by scripture. This is an important distinction, but one that returns us to the importance of building relationships. False teachers seek popularity and fame. Confused individuals seek truth, even if they do not know yet how or where to find it. This should bring great comfort to those of us who are frequently befuddled by complex parts of scripture, but it should also give great impetus to those who teach the Bible. Defending truth requires knowing scripture so that it can be taught well and in line with apostolic teaching.

One of the confusing things about these first verses of 1 Timothy is the list of sins prohibited by Paul in verses 9 to 11. When we study them more carefully, though, we see that they are closely linked to those outlined in the Decalogue (Exodus 20:1–17). It is important to note this. Paul wants to distinguish that the law is not the route to salvation but that it remains useful. It is still the moral standard we must use. So, defending the truth of the gospel involves teaching the ten commandments and the other underlying principles found in the Old Testament law. If we teach these things in love and with the proper perspective, we’re probably on the right track.

2 Recalling testimony

1 Timothy 1:12–2:7

When someone asks you why you're a Christian (presuming that you are), what do you say? I have had many answers over the years, but one thing is constant in my responses. To use the words of Paul in verse 14: 'the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly.' And as Paul points to his former violent and blasphemous ways as a means to propel forward his argument that Christ died for everyone, so too can I do the same. Paul calls himself 'the worst' of sinners (v. 15). For me to do the same could be perceived as hyperbolic gesturing, but I think it is common to believe that if people really knew the truth about us, we wouldn't be liked as much, and we certainly wouldn't be worth dying for.

It's part of the reason why I find Paul an appealing and somewhat relatable figure in scripture. When I look at his prolific ministry, it is difficult to make that association. But, when I hear that he too struggled with his past, I am comforted. We all have things in our past (and sometimes our present too) which mean it's not hard to convince us that we have 'fall[en] short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23). But instead of wallowing in self-pity and a failure to forgive himself, which is often my tendency, Paul recalls his former ways as a testimony to his current state. He proudly bears his testimony – as difficult as it may be – to demonstrate the grace and mercy of Christ.

In the verses that follow, Paul instructs Timothy to recall the prophecies spoken about him. It is wonderful to remember the grace and mercy bestowed upon us in our darkest moments. But it is also important to remember that we have each been uniquely called to something. Not all of us will have heard clear prophetic words, as Timothy seemingly did, but each of us was lovingly created for a purpose. We each have been given gifts and qualities that reveal the goodness of God here on earth. So while we are certainly sinners saved by grace, to 'fight the battle well' (v. 18) we need to focus on who we are now in Christ, not solely on who we used to be.

3 Leading with integrity

1 Timothy 2:8—3:13

These are difficult verses. Whether you are more egalitarian or complementarian, whether you're a woman or not, the instructions here for women to be 'quiet' are strikingly countercultural in today's world. The word count I have is inadequate for any substantial analysis of gender roles as presented in 1 Timothy and the New Testament more broadly. But, instead of doing a woeful job of textual analysis, I want to point us to a broader theme we encounter in these verses, one that may help us understand the tricky verses: Paul is demanding integrity from those who will carry forward the gospel message.

Church leadership is difficult. This is as true now as it was then, even if the situations faced are markedly different. One thing I imagine has remained the same, though, is fallible humans trying to display the goodness of an infallible God. To do this well, the whole body of Christ needs to be involved because we each bring different gifts to the table (see 1 Corinthians 12). But we also need leaders who can teach doctrine and scripture, who can provide pastoral care and direct the path of the church they have been given. Church leaders aren't innately better people than their laity. God doesn't love them more or grant them special blessings reserved for the select few. However, leaders do have responsibilities marked out for them in passages like today's.

Paul's instructions here rely upon the integrity of the leader. Paul wants church leaders to be well-respected and well-liked, not because church leadership is a popularity contest but because the gospel can't spread when its teachers are selfish or distracted. Perhaps the reason why Paul wants the women in Ephesus to be modestly dressed and quiet is because their current behaviour detracts people from the gospel message they are purporting to teach. Remember that Paul's first admonition to Timothy regards false teachers. The call to 'practise what you preach' comes to mind. When our church leaders talk and behave in ways that seem contrary to the gospel, we lose faith in them and sometimes even in the church entirely.

So it is important, however we understand the gender roles being outlined here, to remember that every church leader's first call is to follow Jesus themselves. If they're not doing so, they cannot credibly instruct others to do the same.

4 Rejecting hypocrisy

1 Timothy 3:14–4:5

We are brought back to Genesis in these verses, with Paul reminding the church in Ephesus (via Timothy) that creation is good, with a specific emphasis here on food. Oftentimes at the moment, when we discuss creation theologically, the priority is often environmentalism. How can we protect the natural world? This is a good and worthwhile endeavour, one we must spend more time on. But that is not necessarily what Paul is referring to here.

The forbidding of marriage and abstaining from certain foods were characteristic of sects led by ‘hypocritical liars’ (4:2). When considered alongside the other warnings regarding false teachings, it can be assumed that Paul is concerned about the motivations of the teachers and the ways that it can distract people from Jesus.

Despite the inclusion of marriage in these verses being a source of interest for many readers, it is more appropriate to understand these verses as being about food. We can infer from these verses (with knowledge of the historical context) that the leaders Paul refers to enforced harsh dietary restrictions on their followers, even though Jesus (and later Peter) had asserted that there needn’t be further delineations regarding clean and unclean foods. But, as with the earlier discussion about false teachings, this is not a critique of people trying their best to understand the changes to their religious activity and getting confused. Paul is calling out these leaders for their deceptive ways.

Interestingly, this passage sits between two passages discussing qualities of good leadership. Paul is constantly keeping Timothy aware of possible traps he may fall into, or that he should identify in others. Consistency is crucial to good Christian leadership. Paul is not condemning abstaining from particular foods or even abstaining from marriage. He is condemning a more systemic issue in the leadership of those sects: hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy in leadership shouldn’t come as a surprise to Timothy and it shouldn’t to us either. Paul writes that people will go astray and deviate from Christ’s teaching. We could debate endlessly what that means and what that looks like, but the important thing to note here is that the church is ‘the pillar and foundation of the truth’ (3:15) and so it ought to be respected as such.

5 Practising godliness

1 Timothy 4:6—5:2

Those who run will know that the first run (or the first run in a while) can feel like it lasts a lifetime – even if it only lasts a mere number of minutes. But, as your body becomes more adjusted to moving in such a way, it becomes easier and easier. Soon, what once felt like a lifetime is now a warm-up jog on a much longer run.

Practising godliness is somewhat similar. It can be easy to assume that being godly is a sort of ‘automatic upgrade’ that one receives upon becoming a Christian. Or, if not when someone becomes a Christian, surely when one is appointed to lead. But Paul’s instructions to Timothy here indicate that practising godliness is not as simple as it may seem. By likening it to ‘physical training’ (v. 8), Paul is pointing us to the reality that godliness is not found in quick fixes or by taking shortcuts.

As Paul says, ‘godliness has value for all things’ (4:8) and therefore it is a noble goal for each of us. However, just as skipping to the fourth week of a running programme isn’t wise, so too should we be mindful that racing ahead in our journey with godliness isn’t wise either. It takes practice, so we cannot beat ourselves up when we falter. And we shouldn’t necessarily set the same expectations on new Christians as we do on seasoned leaders. Paul speaks of the church seeing Timothy’s ‘progress’ (4:15). It is not a shameful thing to grow; it is a sign of the Spirit working within us.

It is common to hear 4:12 used to uplift young leaders in the church. It is worth remembering, though, that this is not necessarily optimal. We should not rely on our young people to ‘set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity’ (4:12). It is wonderful when they do so and we should honour and respect the words of our youth. But hopefully, we can also provide positive role models for them too, from all generations. 1 Timothy so far has largely been about false and hypocritical leaders. Perhaps the church in Ephesus needed young leaders like Timothy because they had no good ones from older generations. Let us not fall into a similar trap, relying on youth because they could not rely on us.

6 Uplifting the downtrodden

1 Timothy 5:3–16

‘Fighting the battle’ for Christ is not always about being on the offensive. There are defence mechanisms that the church needs to properly implement if it is to be the most successful in the battle. These are outlined in our reading today. Paul acknowledges that sometimes vulnerable people (with a specific focus here on young widowed women) draw away from Christ as they seek to elevate their status or fix their situation (v. 11). Therefore, supporting the vulnerable is not just an inclusionary measure; it’s a way of protecting the spiritual life of the flock.

Offensive and defensive strategies are equally valuable in military campaigns or team sports, even if the offensive plays tend to get more attention from those looking on. Just because a player isn’t scoring goals doesn’t mean they don’t work as hard as the others on the team. Likewise, working to care for the vulnerable in a church family may not be a glamorous role. It’ll likely involve a lot of hard work that is largely hidden. But it is stressed throughout scripture that God calls his people to care for the vulnerable. It is an important part of the church’s DNA.

Why then does Paul delineate who can and cannot receive institutional support? Consider your own church. It may long to serve everyone, but the desires of the church body are often (sadly) overwhelmed by the great needs of the wider community. And, even if there were endless resources, it is extremely difficult to be ‘all things for all people’. Paul isn’t establishing a hierarchy of care, although it can certainly appear that way at first glance. He’s acknowledging that the church doesn’t have infinite capacity. So, if there are people within the church community who can support their own relatives, they ought to do that first, ensuring that those with truly nothing can access the care they need.

Guidelines

In this first week of notes, I have outlined some of the ways I see Paul instructing Timothy to build on his existing good work and grow as a leader. Wherever your relationship is to leadership, here are some questions to consider:

- Where are you? Some of us have been told to stay where we are, whereas others of us are called to move on. I find that not engaging the question regularly can lead to complacency. We stay in the same place (if not physically, then spiritually) because it's often easier to do so. So, first and foremost, locate yourself. Consider where you are and perhaps even ask God if you ought to stay there.
- Throughout 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul instructs Timothy to cling to gospel truths and defend them. How do you ensure that you know these for yourself? Is it through regular Bible reading, engagement in a church community, or are there other ways you remind yourself of God's goodness?
- What is your testimony? Recall your journey of faith and consider how God may be prompting you to lead and serve others in the way only you can. Each of us has unique gifts and abilities, but we also each have a unique story, which can sometimes be just as powerful a tool for mission and ministry as our tangible skills.
- Paul tells Timothy to reject hypocrisy. Where do you see hypocrisy most clearly in your world? Perhaps it's your workplace or community, or maybe it's through the news when you look at national and international leaders. Consider where hypocrisy may be seeping into your own heart and ask God to convict you of where you may be able to change.
- Uplifting the downtrodden was a crucial part of Jesus' mission and therefore ought to be replicated in our ministry today. How might you engage in your community to care more for the vulnerable among you, even if and when they pose challenges?



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