

The Priority of Godliness

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you very much indeed, Phil. Yes, we're going to turn back to the passage that Phil read to us. And as Phil said, we are continuing our study this morning in 1 Timothy, and we're using this study to think through what it means to be a healthy gospel church. A year ago the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland agreed that our denominational vision would be that there would be a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland.

And that's a hugely helpful vision to have. And we're using 1 Timothy to help us think through a little bit more about what that means. We're going to look at the whole passage that we read, but let me just read again verses 7 and 8, where Paul writes, this passage is highlighting the importance and priority of godliness. It's helping us to think through what it means to be a healthy gospel church. And this week we're going to highlight the fact that a healthy gospel church is active and exciting. Or to put it the other way around, a healthy gospel church is not passive and not boring. And this is incredibly important for us all to think about because it highlights two big problems that we face today as a church. One problem is that people perceive church as passive and boring. The other problem is that often the people who have that perception are actually correct. It can be so easy for us to be passive in our lives as Christians. And it's so easy for church to come across and to actually be boring. And this raises a really interesting and challenging issue that we all need to think about. If someone wants to say, you know, well, I don't come to church because I think nothing happens, it's passive and I think it's boring. If someone thinks like that, we would think, we would maybe find ourselves thinking, well, they don't have a very healthy mindset. But if it's the case that a church has been perceived as passive and boring, then it could actually be the case that it's not the person whose mind, person's mindset that's unhealthy, it could be that the church itself is unhealthy. Now, I'm not saying that, you know, we should provide entertainment and activities to keep everybody happy in terms of all the expectations. That's not what we're saying at all. And I'm not accusing us as a congregation of being passive and boring, although maybe sometimes you think my preaching is boring and that might be true. The key point is the principle that's been set before us in this passage, that being passive and boring is a danger that we have to guard against. And if you look back in history and see the great ministries that God has raised up in our nation, when you think of men like John

Knox, Thomas Chalmers, Eric Alexander, Myrtle Macaulay, Myrtle Alec Macleod in our own communities here, these people were never passive. And they were never boring. A healthy gospel church is active and really exciting. All of this is presented to us by Paul in the language of training. You can see that in verses six to eight that are on the screen. But it's interesting to note that the words trained here, you've got the word trained there and then you've got the word trained here. It's actually two different words that mean slightly different things. Because the verse six word for trained that you can see here, that means to train your mind, to be educated, to be nurtured, brought up, taught how to think.

The word in verse seven here, made a right mess of my throwing. You can see the word I'm trying to highlight that word there actually means to go to the gym. That's literally where we get the word gym gymnasium from. So it's speaking to us of much more physical bodily exercise. And I love that Paul uses these two different words, mind, body, because it's a very holistic picture. But what I want us all to recognize is that both these words and this whole concept of training is speaking to us of investment. The idea of putting effort in and of getting a beneficial result out. And education is an investment. You know, you think of the effort and work that you put into learn to understand and the result is that you can read, write, make calculations, think and speak clearly. It's a great investment. Exercise is the same. You put in hours of training and effort and it makes you stronger, fitter, faster and more capable. And the pattern is very simple. That, you know, if you don't put the effort in, then

you don't get the result that you desire to have. Paul is telling us that exactly the same applies to us as a church. We do need to put effort into our lives as Christians. That means that we need to be active. And the result is that wonderful things can happen. And that makes church very exciting. And so it's these two things that I want us to unpack a little bit more today. So first of all, a healthy gospel church is active. Now, before we go into that, I want to just raise a really important issue that's actually come up several times in our discussions at our midweek meetings. On a Thursday, when we get together for Bible study, we talk a little bit more about what we've been studying on Sunday. And a really important issue has come up several times. And that is that in everything that this passage describes or that everything that this letter describes, and in any of the ways that we seek to be active as a church, in all of that, we are totally dependent on God, the Holy Spirit. That no matter what we do as a church, no matter what we do as Christians, all of that is in complete and total dependence on God.

[6 : 42] In fact, we can't even read or understand a passage like this without the help of God, the Holy Spirit. As verse 10 highlights, we're serving a living God. And that means that we're completely dependent on his life, his power, his work. But at the same time, that doesn't mean that we sit passively, or that we do nothing as Christians. So what I want you to do is to imagine a plane. As Christians, we are not the passengers on that plane. We are the cabin crew. And the difference is really important because passengers sit passively while the plane carries them along. The cabin crew work, but they're still getting carried along by the plane. And that's exactly what it's like as we seek to be Christians.

If you are a Christian, or if you become a Christian, this is what it's all about. That we are to be actively working. But all the time we're being carried along by the Holy Spirit. And if you're wondering who the pilot is, it's Jesus. That's a helpful illustration, I think, for us to have in mind. So with all that in our minds, we come to these verses and Paul here gives lots of personal instructions to Timothy. Now, in a passage like this, it can be easy to detach ourselves from the obligations because we think, well, well, I'm not a Christian.

I'm not Timothy. But the principle is really important. The principle that Paul's setting before Timothy is that what he is as an individual is going to shape what the congregation is like in Ephesus, where he is pastor. What Timothy is, is going to shape what the church is. And of course, exactly the same applies for us. What we are as individuals is going to determine what we are as a church. And that makes perfect sense theologically because the church is us. The church is the people who follow Jesus. That makes it crucial for all of us young, old men, women to all take on board the instructions that Paul is giving here. So what is Paul saying? Well, what I want us to notice today is that Paul is giving Timothy a superb list of do's and don'ts. Now, straight away alarm bells might start ringing in our minds because one of the things that we often, we've often identified as a fault in churches across the world is when Christianity is presented as a list of do's and don'ts. That's one of the kind of unhelpful presentations that have been made of Christianity.

Most of people have done that over the years in lots of different contexts, historically and culturally. And there are different periods and different places. People have very easily highlighted lots of do's and don'ts. So in some parts of the world, you know, a big do and don't might be relation to alcohol, a Christian is defined by someone who drinks or doesn't. Sometimes it can be very much be in terms of church attendance in our own culture. Sometimes it can be defined by things that we wear when we come to church or what we do or don't do on a Sunday or whatever else it may be. And all of that is examples of the kind of asceticism that we highlighted last week that can sometimes be well-intentioned, but all too often is actually unhelpful. But the consequential danger of all that is that we can say Christianity is not about do's and don'ts, which in one sense is very true.

It's not about do's and don'ts. But the danger is that we think, well, okay, because it's not about do's and don'ts, let's not have any do's and don'ts. Let's do what we like. But that is just to go to the other extreme, one extreme of legalism where you define Christianity very much by do's and don'ts. The other is to sort of say, well, no, we don't want any of that. So we just do whatever. But that's just the other extreme. And it doesn't make any sense because if you think about it, do's and don'ts are everywhere. So we're all of us who've taken our cars to church, we're going to get in our cars to go home. Driving is full of do's and don'ts. Shopping is full of do's and don'ts. Voting, eating, playing, they're full of do's and don'ts. And it's especially true in terms of training. When you train your mind or your body, that process is full of things that you should do and things that you shouldn't do. And that makes perfect sense. In a classroom, who's going to get the most benefit?

The child who does whatever they like, or the child who listens to the do's and don'ts of the teacher? In the gym, who's going to get fitter? The person who just picks and chooses the things that are easy or the person who listens to the do's and don'ts of their coach? It's reminding us that life is not a choice between conforming to do's and don'ts or saying, you know, there's no do's and don'ts, we can do whatever we like. Life is not about making that choice. Life is about choosing which do's and don'ts you are going to live by. And for us as individuals and as a church together, we need to make sure that we get that choice right, that we choose the right do's and don'ts that's going to shape the way that we live this week and every week of our lives. It all means that if we're going to be active followers of Jesus, there's certain things we need to do and certain things we don't do. And Paul gives a brilliant list of them here. And so I want to just go through them briefly. You can see them from verse 11 to 16. We'll just go through these very, very briefly. First thing he says is command and teach these things. Here Paul tells Timothy to take everything that he's been told in this letter and pass it on to the church community that he's serving. Now, that reverse there contains a massively important principle. The fact that commandments and teaching must always be kept together. Now, that's crucial because it's so easy to just pick one. It's so easy for people to just dish out commandments without ever explaining to people why they should or should not do that. And it looks as though the false teachers that were harassing this church in Ephesus, they were full of commandments, don't do this, do that, eat this, don't eat that, do this, don't do the next thing. But they didn't have the teaching to back it up. Instead, they had their kind of secret myths and their daft speculations. And it's so easy to just dish out commandments without ever giving the teaching that has to be there in order to back it up.

[13:45] That's why if we as a church or we as individual Christians, if we as parents or whatever context we're in with other people, if we're saying to people that you should or should not do something, we've got to be able to explain why. The commandment must be accompanied by teaching. And we can't just say because it's wrong or because it's right. We need to be able to teach a more coherent explanation. Now, of course, the opposite through as well, we can easily listen to all sorts of teaching and then never actually put it in our lives.

That's to choose the teaching and to ignore the commandment. The two have to go together. What we know and what we do must go hand in hand. That's especially important when it comes to moral issues. So we will often find as Christians today that our position on moral topics may be a minority position compared to the world around us. And so we would still command that marriage should be between a man and a woman. But if we command that, we also have to be able to teach why. Same that we would want to endorse the command that life should be protected, whether that's in the womb or in old age and terminal illness. But if we make that command, we've got to be able to explain why. Same as through in the practical life of the church with things like elders, deacons that we've been looking at in chapter three. We don't just say it should be like this. We've got to be able to explain why.

And likewise, if we teach that everybody in this community needs to hear about Jesus, we've got to actually obey that command to go out with the gospel message. Commandments without teaching is endangered of being mindless. Teaching without commandments is at risk of being useless. Paul's telling us in just these few verses, few words that the two must go hand in hand. Then he says, let no one despise your youth. Here is another massively important lesson. Paul is reminding Timothy not to be crippled by what other people think of him.

If you think about what this letter revealed regarding the false teaching emphasis, that they're the kind of people who are aggressive, they're critical, quarrelsome, they're slanderers, they're kind of elitist where they see themselves as better than everybody else. In other words, they're the kind of people that would talk about Timothy and would criticize him. And it looks as though his youth was something that they attacked. And Timothy could so easily have been kind of crushed by this anxiety about what other people think of him. And Paul is saying, don't let that happen. Now, this is where I don't want to sound critical, but at the same time, I think it's pointing us to something that's got to be said. I think it's an epidemic of this issue in the churches on the Isle of Lewis. A massive fear of what people think of you. What people will say, what they'll think. Now, I can say that because it's a problem I've struggled with. I struggle with it all the time. I worry about what people think. And I've come across this so many times in the few years that I've had as a pastor.

It's a massive issue for everyone. It's a massive issue for anyone who's not yet a Christian so often that is the hurdle that stops people from coming to Jesus. What are people going to think of me?

What are they going to say about me? Am I going to be ostracized? Will I lose my friends? Will I be judged? What are people going to say about me? And I don't know who they are for you. It might be the people you work with. It might be the people you go to school with. It might be the person you're married to. It might be the people that you socialize with at the weekend. I don't know, but I know that for so many people that's the thing that holds them back. And it's so crucial that A, God will help you with all of that. God will absolutely help you with all of that. And B, even if things are difficult, it's so worth it because what Jesus gives you is just priceless for all eternity. So it's a massive issue for those who aren't Christians, but it's also a massive issue for us as Christians. And you know, it's something that we've got to take very seriously because all too often we are concerned about what people think, what people say about what we wear or what we do as individuals or what we do as a church.

[19:02] It's so easy to be crippled by what other people think Paul says don't let that happen.

He then says, set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. This is another amazing do. With everything that's going wrong in Ephesus, you can easily think that the key for Timothy would be to go and just correct everyone.

Tell them the errors, tell them that they're wrong, sort out the problems. And that is important and there's a sense in which he has to do that. But alongside all of that, Paul says to Timothy, set a better example than all of these false teachers. And it's reminding us that we must never, ever, ever underestimate the power of that word. The power of example.

The word literally means to strike a blow, to make an impression or a dent or an imprint in something. So if you had a big pile of Play-Doh, you could put your fist into it and it would leave an impression. And I think that's a really powerful image because it shows how powerful an example can be. It's something that gets left behind you. It's like footprints and that can work positively and it can work negatively. And it happens in every area of life. Paul identifies five and I just want to encourage you to take these five and to think about them in turn, to think about your own example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. What marks have you left last week? What footprints have you left for your wife, your husband, your children, your colleagues, the people you live with, the people you go to school with? What marks have you left as an example? What have you left last week? What are you going to leave this week?

Verse 13, until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Paul talks about three things there. You've got public reading of Scripture, exhortation or encouragement, is how we sometimes translate that word, and to teaching. They're kind of really three parts of the same thing. They're reminding us of the fact that we need to devote ourselves to what God has revealed in Scripture. Phil highlighted that so well in the children's talk that it's the word of God. We need to devote ourselves to understanding that so that we get the encouragement that we need to live week to week for Jesus so that we can learn more and more about what God is revealing to us. Then he says in verse 14, do not neglect the gift you have, which was given to you by prophecy when the Council of Elders laid their hands on you. Now this is a brilliant, don't. Paul says, don't neglect the gift you have. In other words, he says, don't waste your life. And if there's a don't that the Western world needs more urgently, I don't know what it is. Don't waste your life. Don't waste the opportunities that God has given you. Now not everyone has the same gifts as Timothy. Not everyone has the same experience whereby elders made a prophecy about him. That doesn't happen to many people at all. But every Christian has gifts. Every

[22:47] Christian can use them. Every Christian can waste them. And it's reminding us of two massively important lessons that all of us need to take on board. Life is far too easy to waste. And life is far too precious to waste. Let's not neglect the gifts that he's given to us all.

Instead we are to practice these things. Immerse yourself in them so that others may see your progress. That word practice literally means to take pains. And it really expresses the idea of caring about something. Caring about what we're doing, thinking about it, making an effort, being ready to suffer in order for the benefit that will come to stay active. You think about exercise, that involves pain. But that pain is valuable. It's so valuable.

And the result will be progress. Progress that people can see. A great reminder that the Christian life is an amazing journey of growth, of opportunity, of development, and progress. And then last of all he says, keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching, persist in this, for by doing so you'll save both yourself and your hearers. Now, when you're in training, whether it's training your mind in school, college, work, whatever it may be, or training your body in terms of exercise, it's so easy to

start watching other people, isn't it? So at school, you see other people and you're doing your work and then you're wondering, how are they getting on? Everyone's doing exams just now, get grades, what did I get, what did you get? Same at the gym, you can be running, well not that I ever go to the gym, so I'm guessing this is what happens at the gym. You can be running, and you're like, oh I've done 5K, oh 7, oh. It's so easy to watch people, look at other people, to see what they're doing. Now sometimes we watch other people to criticise them, you know, you could think, oh you're not going as fast as me, not that I ever get to say that. You know, sometimes it's to criticise other people, probably more often it's to criticise ourselves. You look at other people and you're like, oh man I'm not as fast as that, or I'm not as smart as that, and Paul is saying the person that you should be watching is yourself. Not other people, just to watch your own hearts, to watch your own conduct, to strive to keep on following Jesus. All of these are the do's and don'ts that lead to godliness. None of them happen by themselves, all of them involve us being active. Now that activity is always done in total reliance on the grace of God working through the power of the Holy Spirit. As I said, we can't even read this passage, you can't even read those do's and don'ts and understand them without the help of the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit never gives us an excuse to be passive. In fact, who is it who's giving us these commands to be active? It's the Holy Spirit. He's the one saying, do this, don't do that. And that's why in verse 10, Paul can talk about toiling and striving, because it all takes effort.

As individuals, as a church together, we need to be active. But all of that can sound a bit burdensome, can't it? And it's true, training is burdensome. Effortless training is not training at all, is it? And if that was all that was in this passage, then it could easily leave us feeling a bit like, well, you know, I know I should be that, but I know that I'm failing, we could be discouraged, maybe even overwhelmed. But the passage doesn't teach us that it's just about being active. It's also teaching us that a healthy gospel church is exciting. My time is disappearing. So we're only going to spend five minutes on this.

[27 : 02] But I want us to think through this reality that a healthy gospel church is exciting. As we're saying, Paul is presenting all of this truth to us through the imagery of training.

He's using training to highlight the priority and importance of Godliness. It's conveying to us the fact that as Christians, we've got to put effort into our lives as Christians.

But it's also teaching us that if we do, wonderful results will come. And that's made really clear for us in verse eight. I put verses six to 10 on the screen, but you can see it in verse eight in particular, while bodily training is of some value, going from here, verse eight, bodily training is of some value. Godliness is of value in every way, for it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. Paul's making this comparison between the fact that training, training physically is of some value, but training for Godliness is far more worthwhile. In fact, he says that training for Godliness is of value in every way. And the reason it's valuable in every way is that it holds promise for the present life now and for the life to come. Now, we need to take those words seriously. In every way means that for everything that you are going to do this week, investing in Godliness is going to be beneficial. And we can prove that by just thinking through all the specific instructions that Paul has given, you think of all the things we've gone through maintaining a balance between commanding and teaching, setting a good example to everyone that we meet, not being crippled by the opinions of other people, not wasting the gifts and opportunities we have, watching ourselves so that we don't say or do things that we regret. Just ask yourself, if you do all of that, is it going to ruin your week? Of course it's not. Is neglecting all that going to muck up your week? Almost definitely. And for the life to come, investing in what God wants is worth everything and everything that's going to keep us from him will prove itself to be worth nothing. And that's the massive question that this passage confronts us all with. What are you investing in? What are you investing in for the present life? What's going to consume your effort and energy this week? What results are you kind of trying to get and prioritizing in your life? What are you investing in for the present life? What are you investing in for the life to come? And we've all got to think about that. We've all got to think about that. Verse 7 is an incredibly powerful warning.

It says, have nothing to do with silly, irreverent myths. The principle that lies behind that statement is this. Don't waste your time investing in stuff that's stupid. And to discern what is stupid and what's valuable, we need to think about the now and we need to think about the then between the present day and eternity. Both aspects of this verse are crucial, the now and the then. Sometimes people who aren't yet Christians can make the mistake of thinking that only now matters, that my comfort

just now, my achievements just now, my possessions just now is all that really matters and we neglect the future. Sometimes Christians can make the opposite mistake and we think that it's only the then that matters and it's like, well, I've got my ticket to heaven and that's all that matters and what I do this week, well, it's nothing compared to eternity. True godliness recognizes the value in both.

And this brings us to our last point. And I think maybe if there's anything that you remember about what I say today, this is the thing I want you to remember most. All of this is reminding us of the incredible potential that the church has to serve and glorify Jesus.

[32 : 00] That word potential is what all of this is pointing us towards. The idea of training, the idea of investment, it's all pointing us to the potential that the church has to serve and glorify Jesus. Now, in terms of Christianity, in terms of the church, there's a certain category of person and that's my stickman is just to depict the person. Stick person is depicting the person because it applies to everyone here. And this is a certain category of person and I want to just outline some of the characteristics of this category of person. They have the potential to think and understand the best way for humanity to live. They have the potential to be an outstanding example to the people they live with, the people they work with, the people in their community. They have the potential to teach others about Jesus. They have the potential to show others how to live a godly life and to make amazing progress in the service of God. They have the potential to be an incredible blessing to others. They have the potential to be that this week and to bring blessings that are going to last for all eternity. You'll see that all of these are arising out of the do's and don'ts in this passage. This is a category of person that has all of this potential and the category of person has a special name. What's their name? You. That's why we've all got to be active investing in that potential and that's why following Jesus is so exceptional.

It's exciting because it's incredible what he can do through all of you. For you as a Christian, that is the potential that you have. Already in lots of ways you're showing that potential. We want to do that more and more and more. What about anyone who's not yet a Christian? Is that through of you? Too right it is because this is what God is calling for you, calling you to. This is what God wants for you. This is why he's holding out the offer of the gospel to you today. That person, that category of person is you and all we have to do is follow Jesus today and for the rest of our lives. A healthy gospel church is active and so, so exciting. Amen. Let's pray.