

Being Someone to Follow

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[0 : 00] Thank you very much, Keita, and let me add my welcome. If you've not met me yet, my name's Archie. I'm the pastor in training here. It's great to be with you this morning. If you have spent any time with me at all, if you do know me, even just a five-minute conversation, you probably know that I play a little bit of rugby. I used to play really quite a lot of rugby. In fact, I was pretty obsessed. I was obsessed with being the best rugby player I could possibly be.

And I would literally spend hours watching other people play rugby. I'd find the best players in the world in my position, and I would study what they do. I'd watch them and re-watch them really closely. And do you know, I think we do that in life, don't we? We might not do it as obsessively as that or as intentionally as that, but in all sorts of ways and in all areas of life, I think. At work, as we seek to further our career. Maybe it's just a sibling or a parent that we've always looked up to. Maybe at university, there's someone on your course who just seems to be smashing it. In all sorts of areas of life, we look for people to watch. We look for examples to follow, for people to emulate. And I think that can be a really good thing, but it doesn't always go so well, does it? For many of us, I'm sure you'll be able to think back to school days.

I'm sure this isn't just me at school. A couple of guys and girls, I think, in most schools, in most years, people that everyone is watching, the popular kids. Thing is, one of the reasons, certainly at my school, the reason that I thought they were so cool is because of their disregard for the rules. And so following their example, tempting though it might be to want to be in with the popular kids, was only ever going to get me into trouble. Who we're watching, the examples that we follow in life, the role models that we choose, are just so important. It's important for our life generally, but I think we see in our passage this morning that it's especially important for us in our Christian lives as a church. We're in this letter from Paul to Timothy. Timothy's in Ephesus, and as we've seen over the last few weeks, this letter is a sort of blueprint, a sort of manual for how to get the church back on track. And those verses we looked at last week in chapter 3, verses 14 and 15, really, I think, give us a purpose for why Paul is writing. It says this, so that Timothy would know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.

In other words, this manual for getting the church back on track is all about people who live in a certain way and a people who uphold the truth. And that's no different in this morning's passage. See in verse 12, have a look at verse 12 of chapter 4, Paul wants Timothy to set an example for the believers to be the sort of person that believers might follow. But maybe you noticed, as Cater read for us, there are two sorts of people that we might follow, aren't there, in this passage, two sorts of people that we might be watching. Because there are also those hypocrites teaching lies, lies that are contrary to the gospel. We're going to call those guys the pretenders.

[3 : 36] And then we could also be watching Timothy or those like Timothy, whose lives and beliefs are rooted in the truth of the gospel. For want of a better word, we're going to call them the professionals.

So who are we watching? We can watch and follow pretenders, or we can watch and follow the professionals. So who are these pretenders? Have a look at verse 1 with me. The Spirit clearly says that in later times, some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. And when this verse says later times, that's just the time after Jesus's death and resurrection, after the coming of the Holy Spirit. So it's Paul's time, it's Timothy's time, but it's also our time.

And in that time, see what the verse says, there will be those that the Spirit clearly says, I think that's just, could be a number of things, a prophetic word given by one of the early believers, maybe something God had revealed to Paul. It could just be Paul referencing Jesus's words. It doesn't

really matter which. The point is that God is saying that in that time, there will be those who are going to follow, we see that in verse 1, follow deceiving spirits, spirits that lie, things taught by demons. And so with that in mind, when we read in verse 2, that such teachings come through hypocritical liars, we know that though these pretenders are human, we know that the real problem, the deception being taught, it has its origin in spiritual evil. And that's the same today with anything that is taught that's contrary to the gospel. But do notice that these pretenders themselves are hypocrites. In other words, they say and teach one thing, but they do another. Hypocrites that in the rest of verse 2, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. These pretenders' consciences then have been desensitized to sin. They no longer feel the weight of what they do. And so they're able to teach and say one thing, but do another. And what is it then that they are teaching? Well, have a look at verse 3. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods. Here I think are two of our most basic desires as human beings. Sexual intimacy in marriage and satisfying our hunger with food.

And these pretenders seem to be claiming that to be properly spiritual, to be a real Christian, you've got to abstain from those things. Now it might be appropriate for a believer to fast or to remain single for a time. Indeed, Paul elsewhere commends both of those things, doesn't he?

But the key here is that these pretenders forbid and order this sort of abstinence, as if to say, without it, you're not a true believer. This sort of teaching, Paul says, is contrary to the gospel, so contrary to the gospel that back in verse 1, did you notice this? To follow it is to abandon the faith. Why is that? Well, because I think in the rest of verse 3 and 4, we see that these things were created by God. They are good things created to be received with thanksgiving. So just while we're on this specific sort of false teaching that we see here, it's worth seeing this. I think this is true, that people often think of the Christian life as sort of joyless, not just outside the church, but in the church too, as restrictive, as marked by abstaining from certain pleasures. Friends, we've got to see that pleasure is a good thing, that the desire for sex, the desire to enjoy food, these are good gifts from God. And so to really enjoy pleasure for all that it's worth, first we've got to recognize that it is a good gift from God, and therefore not something simply to run away from. But more than that, because these things are, in verse 5, consecrated, which just means made holy, by the word of God and prayer. And so it's not the case that indulging our desires in whatever way we please is going to bring us lasting and satisfying pleasure. But it is the case that somehow our desires can be made holy, and therefore truly bring lasting pleasure, truly bring lasting satisfaction. C.S. Lewis helpfully says in the screw tape letters, he's writing there from the perspective of a demon, advising a junior demon on how to handle his human. It's obviously allegorical, but he says there here, never forget that when we, that is the demons, are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are in a sense on the enemies, that's God for them, we are on the enemy's ground. In other words, God intends pleasures to be enjoyed in healthy, normal and satisfying ways.

[9 : 25] Gifts like marriage and food can be really enjoyed when they're enjoyed according to the blueprint of God's word, the patterns for life found in the Bible, healthy, normal and satisfying patterns for life.

And then when God's word isn't so clear on one issue or another, though I think very often it is clear, we can pray. Do you see that in verse 5? And then rely on a clear Christian conscience, as opposed to the sort of seared conscience of the hypocritical pretender. There's lots we could say about Christian conscience, but I think it's enough to say for now that we know them, we can't use it as an excuse to disobey what is clear in God's word. And I think it's also worth saying that when two faithful Christians come to different conclusions about something in their conscience, and we see this elsewhere in the New Testament, the Bible is really clear that it's important that we accommodate one another's views with love, without causing one another to stumble and go against our own conscience. So that I think is the specific false teaching that we see here.

But the principle is bigger than that. Let me try and illustrate. I wonder if you remember the Nokia 3310. It was a famously reliable mobile phone. It didn't look like much. It was a bit of a brick, in fact. But it did the job. I never had a Nokia 3310. Instead, I was sold by the advertising. I had a Nokia Engage. I don't know if anyone remembers one of those. It's quite niche. But it was a phone, but also sort of a handheld games console. And it looked really flashy. The adverts for it were brilliant. And so I just had to have it. And yet within weeks of having it, it became clear that it wasn't really capable of making phone calls. The speaker was rubbish. And it was even pretty difficult to send a

text because the buttons were tiny. And I think in a similar sort of way, the bigger principle in this passage is that attempts to manufacture a spiritual relationship with God that requires more than what Jesus has already done, selling us flashy looking extras. If you follow Graham, our pastor on social media, you may have seen that recently he shared this quote from Mark Dever, who's a pastor over in Washington, D.C. Mark Dever said this, the problem, of course, is that human beings have always proven to be unreliable guides for inventing ways to approach God. And I think that's true for what the pretenders are teaching here in Ephesus. But this human attempt to approach God is also the primary way, I think, that the gospel has always been distorted and is distorted today. How appropriate then that today is

[12 : 19] Reformation Day. And it was 504 years ago today that this truth was recovered. The good news of justification by faith alone in Christ alone, through free grace alone. It's what we believe.

So who are we watching? Who are we following? It's just so important that we're aware of these sorts of pretenders, both in the church and outside. And we'll know them by what they teach. As we ask, are they claiming a sort of more complete spiritual reality? Are they offering salvation by any means other than Jesus himself or additional to Jesus himself? But we will also know them by their lives? Because the pretenders in this letter are hypocrites. Their lives don't match that spiritual reality that they claim. And this, I think, is where it's so important to be following those that we can really know. We'll return to this later. But to be able to see whether their lives bear fruit that is good or fruit that is rotten, if they truly bear the characteristics that we saw outlined in chapter three just two weeks ago. Well, that's the pretenders. But what about the professionals? What about Timothy? Remember again, in verse 12, Paul wants him to set an example for the believers. Paul wants him to be the sort of man who, when people watch, when people follow him, they see the gospel. So how does that work? Well, have a look at verse 16 with me. I think it gives us two helpful categories as we think about this. It says, watch your life and doctrine closely. In other words, pay careful attention, Timothy, to the way that you live, your actions and your character, and pay careful attention to your doctrine, your beliefs, your teaching. And we'll see both of those as we walk through the second half of this passage together. Beginning in verse six, have a look at that. If you point these things out, notice that's a phrase repeated in verse 11 and then in a slightly different way in verse 16. So what are these things, these matters? Well, I think the rest of verse six tells us, if you point out these things, you will be a good minister of

Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. In other words, Timothy's doctrine, what he believes and what he teaches is to be three things, rooted in Christ Jesus and what he has done, rooted in truth and rooted in the teaching that he himself has followed, the teaching of the apostles, the teaching of Paul. And so in verse seven, he is to have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives tales. That is, I think, just the false teaching of the pretenders. Instead, still in verse seven, train yourself to be godly. What does it mean to be godly? I think simply to be nourished on the truth of the faith and good teaching. That is, to be constantly reminded of the glorious truth of the gospel. The truth that though we don't measure up, that though we are naturally rebelling against God, he has made a way for us to know him by becoming flesh in the man Jesus and dying in our place to offer us, freely offer us grace. This is what it means to be godly, to live a life that reflects that glorious truth. Not to be perfect, but to live reliant on what Jesus has done. Do you see how different that is to hypocritical pretenders setting up barriers to entry for the faith? But notice that this requires training to remain faithful to Jesus, to grow in faithfulness. And we know that this is true in other areas of life, don't we? If we want to be a musician, we know that we have to practice and keep on practicing, stay in practice. If you want to be a runner, you have to train and keep training. So Timothy is going to have to train to work at godliness.

[17 : 03] And so for us, it's not that we become Christians and boom, we're perfect just like that. And it's not that we need to be perfect in order to become Christians or to serve in church or even to lead in church. But we've got to be committed to training in godliness. Training that is rooted in Christ Jesus, in truth and the apostles' teaching that is rooted in God's word. That's why we have the Bible open at everything that we do as a church. On a Sunday morning, I mean, what are we doing even right now, if not training in godliness? Reminding ourselves of the gospel of Jesus Christ. At midweek, small groups, at prayer meetings. It's why we're committed to training ministry trainees, because we recognize the value in setting aside time to train towards godliness. It's why you've decided to take me on as your pastor in training, so that I might follow godly examples and become an example of godliness, that we might grow together and multiply. This is the sort of

training that

Timothy was to be involved in. And you see, it's contrasted in verse 8 with physical training. Why? Because though physical training is of some value, godliness has value for all things, both for the present life and the life to come. Probably, I think this is just a reference back to verse 3, where we said that abstinence from marriage or certain foods, self-discipline may have some value.

Indeed, physical training, whether in the gym or going for a run or whatever it is, has some value in this life. But godliness, hope in the living God, holds eternal value. Maybe you're here this morning and you're not a Christian. A question for you then, what do you value?

The things that you value in this life, they might be really good things. They might be things really worth valuing.

But how does their promise compare to the offer of eternal life? Because this is the offer of the gospel. Not that you have to do anything to earn it.

[19 : 31] No amount of abstinence, no human attempt to achieve or to prove. But rather, our hope as Christians is in the living God, who, have a look at verse 10, is the saviour of all people and especially those who believe.

That's not to say that all people will receive eternal life. Of course it's not. That would contradict everything else that Paul says. But I think for God to be the saviour of all people simply means that all people enjoy the benefits of his goodness in this life as the sun shines on us all.

We all enjoy the gift of life and everything that comes with it. But also, I think in the sense here that the offer of eternal life does really have the power to save.

And it's offered freely to anyone. A freely offered gift. So again, no human attempt to approach God can work. Instead, he has approached us.

Come to us in the person of Jesus and he freely offers eternal life. If we will only receive that offer and believe in him. So we have these two tightly connected ways in which Timothy is to be an example.

[20 : 49] In life and in doctrine. Summarized, I think, in verses 12 and 13. In verse 12, his life. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.

Be an example of the gospel in the way that you live. And verse 13, his doctrine. Until I come, devote yourself to public reading of scripture, to preaching and to teaching.

Be an example in your doctrine, in your sharing of the truth through reading scripture, preaching and teaching. And if Timothy is going to be an example in life and in doctrine, then to do so we'll be not neglecting his gift in verse 14.

Probably here, I think, referring specifically to the gifts of leadership given to Timothy, the confirmation of which has come both by God through prophecy and through the church, through its elders.

And I think that certainly suggests that we're speaking specifically about Timothy's leadership here. But it could just as easily be referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit more generally, right? The gift that Timothy received, that we all receive upon becoming Christians.

[22 : 07] The gift that enables each of us to carry out the various ministries that we're involved in. See, this is why I was quite unsure of calling these guys the professionals.

Because it's not that ministry is reserved to be this kind of example. It's not reserved for those in paid ministry, not at all. We've all been uniquely gifted to be able to contribute to the life of this church together.

Even in this morning's service, we've seen with so many different folks involved, both up here and backstage too. Maybe you're great with children, or a skilled administrator, or good at making coffee, or a devoted prayer warrior, or a brilliant encourager.

We have all of these people in this room today. The list is endless and we all have a part to play. Not just to keep the church functioning, but this is much more important than that.

Back in verse 10, Paul says that is why we labor and strive. Why? Why did Paul labor and strive? Well, it's because they know that it is in using the gifts that God has given us to serve one another that helps us remain faithful and helps us grow in faithfulness together.

[23 : 24] Indeed, in verse 16, see how our passage ends. If Timothy watches his life and doctrine closely, he will save both himself and his hearers.

He and they will persevere in faithfulness to the end if he perseveres in life and in doctrine, serving one another. Two final lines of application to tie this all together then for us as we come into land. Firstly, who are you watching? I think we can be so grateful here at Brunfield that we have a team of elders that meet those qualifications from chapter three, who are examples to us both in life and in doctrine.

Would we watch them? Would we pray for them? It can be tempting, I think, to take our Christian role models from outside of the church more than from in our own local church.

And don't get me wrong. There are lots of wonderful Christian examples for us, both today and through history. But would we look first to the leaders that we have been given by God here in our own local church in Brunfield?

[24 : 36] And of course, we might not just be watching the leaders, but we might be watching other members of our church, following the example of godly brothers and sisters as we seek to serve one another.

In all of this, though, and especially if we are watching outside of the church, will we be carefully asking, do I know the fruit of this person's life?

Do I really know them? This is the benefit of being in the church. And is their doctrine true? Are they pointing me to Jesus, to justification by faith alone in Christ alone, by free grace alone?

And ultimately, of course, for each of us, then, would we be watching him? Would we be watching Jesus? As we seek him out in the pages of Scripture, would we see there the ultimate example of godliness to follow?

And would we watch and follow him closely? So who are you watching? But of course, it's worth asking ourselves, too, who is watching you?

[25 : 44] Because in a sense, we're all watching each other, aren't we, in the church? You might be, like we said, following the example of a godly brother or sister, but who in the church is following your example? And when they do, what do they see?

A hypocritical pretender? Or a grace-filled professional? If you're a parent here today, you can't escape this.

Your children are watching you. And when they do, what do they see? Because for our children, the gospel is both caught and taught, primarily at home, as parents live godly lives.

Again, not to be perfect, but to live lives of honest repentance, lives of grace. And as parents teach their children true doctrine, giving our children in this church every opportunity to catch and to hear the gospel.

And finally, as a church together, there is a watching world. You may have heard it said, preach the gospel and use words if necessary.

[26 : 59] In other words, let yourself be known by your life of love, and people will come to Jesus. That's all fine and well, but I recently saw a quote from Ligon Duncan.

He's another American pastor. He said this, Saying preach the gospel and use words if necessary is like saying feed the hungry and use food if necessary. And of course, in many ways, he's right. Because it is God's word that transforms. It's God's word that is the gospel. And yet Paul says, watch your life and doctrine closely.

I cannot help but feel that to be an effective witness as a church, to be a godly example to a watching world, we have to be prepared to be both. To live godly, honest, repentant lives, lives that reflect the glorious truth of the gospel of grace.

But we also have to be prepared to stand on and preach truth, that truth, to a watching world. There are two types of example in this passage, the pretenders and the professionals.

[28 : 11] So let's be asking, who are we watching? And who is watching us? Let me pray to close. Heavenly Father, I pray that we would, each of us, choose godly examples to follow.

Would you put godly examples in our lives for us to do that, Lord? We pray for our elders and leaders here at Brunfield, that they would be that for each of us.

I pray that we would recognize pretenders. That we would know to avoid them and their teaching.

And Lord, would you by your spirit continue to grow us all into increasing godliness?

Would we be examples to one another as we serve here in your church? And would we be together a godly example to a watching world as we seek to live and preach the gospel of your son, Jesus Christ?

And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. Let's finish it at spotty risk.