

## Train for Godliness

1 Timothy 3:14-4:16

### Introduction

**Goals:** Have you ever been asked to write down your one, five, or ten-year plan? You're like, "Five-year plan?! I'm just trying to make it to Friday." Ask me on Monday morning what my plan is, and I'll say, "My ten-minute plan is coffee. After that, we'll see what happens."

- But plans matter. Goals matter. Our plans direct our behavior. If you want to run a **marathon**, you will follow a training schedule with specific targets to hit along the way. If you want a **promotion**, you'll aim to hit certain sales goals, you'll work extra hours, and you'll do extra training.
- We all aim for something: a job, income, relationship, accomplishment, lifestyle, or a particular feeling. Don't just ask what happens if you fail. Ask what happens if you succeed at the wrong thing. It doesn't help to hit your target if you're aiming at the wrong target.
- "In God's House," what is our target and how do we hit it? We see in today's passage that the **goal is godliness**. House Rule #4: **train for godliness**.
  - (1) Guard the Gospel (1:1-20)
  - (2) Adorn the Gospel (2:1-15)
  - (3) Lead with Integrity (3:1-13)
  - (4) Train for Godliness (3:14-4:16)<sup>1</sup>
- Paul commands Timothy to combat false spirituality by training himself and his people in true, gospel-shaped godliness, which focuses on Christ instead of chasing counterfeits.
  - 1. Look to Christ for True Godliness (3:14–16)
  - 2. Reject Counterfeit Godliness (4:1–5)
  - 3. Devote Yourself to Godly Training (4:6-16)

<sup>3:14</sup> I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, <sup>15</sup> if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. <sup>16</sup> Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. <sup>4:1</sup> Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, <sup>2</sup> through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, <sup>3</sup> who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. <sup>4</sup> For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, <sup>5</sup> for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. <sup>6</sup> If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. <sup>7</sup> Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; <sup>8</sup> for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. <sup>9</sup> The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. <sup>10</sup> For to

<sup>1</sup> (5) Honor One Another (5:1-6:2), (6) Fight the Good Fight (6:3-21)

this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. <sup>11</sup> Command and teach these things. <sup>12</sup> Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. <sup>13</sup> Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. <sup>14</sup> Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. <sup>15</sup> Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. <sup>16</sup> Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

## 1. Look to Christ for True Godliness (3:14–16)

<sup>14</sup> I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, <sup>15</sup> if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. <sup>16</sup> Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

**Fulcrum:** These three verses serve as the center point of Paul's letter (e.g., fulcrum), the very key to Paul's pastoral letters.<sup>2</sup> He is writing these things... so that... you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God.<sup>3</sup> The **"why"** of this letter: how you ought to live as a member of God's household.

- **Household Behavior:** We have been adopted into God's family, we belong to his household.<sup>4</sup> "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people" (1 Pet 2:10).<sup>5</sup> Davion Only was born while his mother was in prison. He entered Florida's foster care system immediately after birth and spent 13 years in group homes, feeling unwanted and invisible. After his biological mother died, he took a risk standing before a Tampa congregation of 300 and said: My name is Davion and I've been in foster care all my life. I know God hasn't given up on me, so I'm not giving up either. I just want a family to love me, and I'll be the best son I can be. The plea went viral, but the solution was closer to home. His longtime casework, Connie Going, adopted him into her family. In his words, "When I finally got adopted, I felt like I could breathe, I wasn't a kid without a family anymore. I was home."<sup>6</sup>
- Belonging changes behavior. Once you know whose you are, it starts to show in how you live. He's talking about the way you live, the way you *conduct* yourself.<sup>7</sup> If you belong to God and are a member of his family, then you should act like it. Does your behavior reflect your identity as God's child?

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<sup>2</sup> HT Spicq, Guthrie

<sup>3</sup> ἵνα εἰδῆς πῶς δεῖ ἐν οἴκῳ θεοῦ ἀναστρέφεσθαι

<sup>4</sup> <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph 2:19-22).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hos 1:9-10, 2:23

<sup>6</sup> Lane DeGregory, Tampa Bay Times, "An Orphan Boy's Plea for a Family," Sept. 22, 2013. Johnny Dodd, People Magazine, "He Pleaded for Adoption in Church—Now He's Helping Other Kids Find Families," Dec. 13, 2023. ABC News, "Florida Teen's Plea for a Family Goes Viral," Oct. 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Eph 2:3, 4:22; 1 Pet 1:15, 18, 3:2;; 2 Pet 2:7, 18; 2 Cor 1:12

**Church:** In case it wasn't clear, the household of God is the church of the living God.<sup>8</sup> The church is God's family. *The church is a family before it is an organization.*

- How much does God love his family? He shed his own blood for her (not someone else's).<sup>9</sup> If he loves the church this much, *you should too*. **There is no room in the heart of a believer for disdain of or apathy toward God's church.**
- "The Church's One Foundation" (Samuel John Stone): The church's one Foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord; / she is His new creation, by water and the Word; / from heav'n He came and sought her to be His holy bride; / with His own blood He bought her, and for her life He died
- When I lived in Virginia, I saw a billboard advertising a church that said, "Not just church." I think I know what they were getting at: probably, "We're not boring or traditional; we're exciting and relevant." But the phrasing is unhelpful. "Just church." Just the blood-bought people of God, indwelt by His Spirit, built on the gospel, and entrusted with the mission of making disciples to the ends of the earth. Just that? Why do we think we need to improve on God's design rather than recover our wonder at it?
- The Bible is clear, and I truly believe that the local church is the tip of the spear for **discipleship** and God's **mission**. I would go so far as to say, *you cannot meaningfully follow God's plan for your life apart from a deeply committed participation in a healthy, gospel-centered local church*. Personal prayer and praise are no substitute for embodied community. When you disconnect your relationship with Christ from his body you create anemic Christians with no power in this world.

**Purpose of the Church:** The church is at the front line of God's plan for the world and has an important role to play: a pillar and buttress of the truth.<sup>10</sup> As a youth pastor, that was a tough translation: "Ha, ha, he said 'buttress.'" A pillar supports the roof. A buttress holds a wall or other structure steady.

- A **pillar** holds the truth *up* for the world to see.
- A **buttress** holds the truth *steady* so it won't topple under pressure.<sup>11</sup>
  - The church is meant to be a stable force pointing to the truth of God in the midst of a shifting world. The church matters because truth matters.
  - Church matters because truth matters
  - The church can either testify to the truth or obscure it
  - "Each local Church has in its power to support and strengthen the truth by its witness to the faith and by the lives of its members" (Lock).
- The church doesn't invent truth; it holds it up. A pillar doesn't create the building; it supports it.
- **What is the truth we support?** Or, more accurately: **who is the truth?** Jesus. Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6).

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<sup>8</sup> ἥτις ἐστὶν ἐκκλησία θεοῦ ζώντος

<sup>9</sup> Acts 20:28

<sup>10</sup> στῦλος καὶ ἐδραίωμα τῆς ἀληθείας

<sup>11</sup> Lat. *firmamentum*

**Mystery Unveiled:** That truth is summed up in the mystery of godliness: Christ Himself. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness.<sup>12</sup>

- A mystery, in biblical terms, refers to something that was previously hidden. But now, in Christ, the mystery of God's grace is not hidden but revealed.<sup>13</sup> No longer hidden, concealed, or veiled, but uncovered, revealed, and unveiled in Christ
- And how undeniably great<sup>14</sup> is what God has revealed to us in Christ. What do you think is great? An athlete, an accolade, an accomplishment? Do you see God's gift in Christ as greater than anything?
- He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.
  - God took on flesh to reveal grace and truth to us. When all thought he was defeated at the cross, we know that three days later he was vindicated at the resurrection, at which angels stood as witnesses. He has been proclaimed among the nations and believed in by people from every corner of the world. And now he reigns in glory, serving as our advocate and mediator, from where he will one day return to judge and make all things new.
  - This is the truth we hold up and hold out to the world, desperate to know. It's also the truth that holds us in the storm.
- When the world shifts, where do you go? To the truth of Jesus, or the lies of the world.

When something or someone other than Jesus becomes our foundation, it leads to despair. It promises freedom but delivers emptiness.

## 2. Reject Counterfeit Godliness (4:1–5)

<sup>1</sup> Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, <sup>2</sup> through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, <sup>3</sup> who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. <sup>4</sup> For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, <sup>5</sup> for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

**Unsurprising:** Paul tells us to expect a move away from godliness. There is a spiritual law of entropy. All things being equal, a sandcastle will crumble, a hot cup of coffee will cool off, and a neglected garden will grow weeds. The same is true of sound doctrine.

- The reason we need to always be training is because people tend toward drifting.
- Don't be surprised, the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith:<sup>15</sup> And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray (Matt 24:11) For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they

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<sup>12</sup> καὶ ὁμολογουμένως μέγα ἐστὶν τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον

<sup>13</sup> Rom 16:25-26, Eph 3:4-6, Col 1:26-27

<sup>14</sup> ὁμολογουμένως μέγα

<sup>15</sup> Apostacize (ἀποστήσονται); latter days, not last days

will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions (2 Tim 4:3) I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20:29-30)

**Demonic:** These false teachers are not simply ignorant, but demonic. They are not teaching these things from sincere principle but from a seared conscience.<sup>16</sup> They are deceitful, hypocritical liars.<sup>17</sup> They can say the wrong thing and feel nothing.

- False teaching isn't just bad theology; it's spiritual warfare. Behind every distortion of the gospel is a spiritual enemy who wants to deceive, divide, and destroy.
- Be wary when a Christian "teacher" ignores doctrine, minimizes sin, or shifts the focus from Christ to themselves.

**False Asceticism:** What were they teaching? They forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving.

- It's tough because there is a beauty in sacrifice. But there is no value in self-punishment. God calls us to joyful obedience, not torturous self-denial. You know why many of us struggle with letting go of sin? Because we really don't believe God is better.
- It can seem pious to punish yourself to please God, but that is not the gospel; that is works-based religion.
  - Asceticism disguises itself as holiness, but it's often a form of unbelief. It's the lie that I must do something because God hasn't done enough. Our work for God flows from what Christ has already done, not from what we still need to do.
- This reminds me of Colossians 2,<sup>18</sup> where people were telling these Christians they didn't just need faith that leads to obedience, they needed to keep the Jewish **festivals** and Old Testament **ceremonial laws**. They didn't just need the word and prayer, they needed **angelic tongues** and **prophetic visions**. That Christ wasn't enough, and the gospel wasn't sufficient.
- This kind of **legalism** only produces pride or despair, but never holiness. Either I'm good enough to do it apart from God, or I'm a failure. \*I've witnessed those who *appear* most holy walk into profound seasons of unbelief or away from the faith altogether when they came to the end of their ability. God doesn't want you to prove yourself; he wants you to trust him. He doesn't want you to impress him with your strength; he wants you to depend on his grace.
- The only hope for spiritual growth and health in the body of Christ is attaching yourself fully and finally to Christ. If you need something besides Christ to grow, then Christ isn't ultimately enough.
- Center your spiritual life on Christ, not your own discipline.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. "pure heart, good conscience, sincere faith" of 1 Tim 1:5

<sup>17</sup> ἐν ὑποκρίσει ψευδολόγων

<sup>18</sup> <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IGr6lDnxG3sIL5Gwr6lshomxWMrSKT4hc67aGdpF-k/edit?usp=sharing>

**God Makes Good Things:** This isn't just a first-century problem. Throughout history, the church has often treated *created* things as if they were somehow unspiritual.<sup>19</sup> *In the Middle Ages*, Roman Catholic leaders began to require celibacy of priests (lit. forbidding marriage). They believed renouncing marriage made *one more holy*. Martin Luther, who had been a monk bound by those vows, helped correct that by marrying a former nun and reminding the world that God made marriage good.

- Celibacy is a beautiful gift when freely chosen for the sake of ministry, but it becomes a false spirituality when it's required.
- I just no longer judge spiritual maturity by outward denial. Some people give things up (e.g., marriage, alcohol, comfort, etc.) in joyful obedience to Jesus, and others in self-righteous pride.
- There is a big difference between suffering with joy, and punishing yourself to be saved. Jesus has already paid the price, you don't have to.

**All About the Attitude:** <sup>4</sup> For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, <sup>5</sup> for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

- How are these and other things *sanctified* by the word of God and prayer with a heart of thanksgiving? Prayer isn't magical (e.g., bless this double quarterpounder to the nourishment of my body).
- The word tells us that God's gifts are for our good, and prayer is our response of gratitude that receives that gift with a thankful heart.

Legalism, self-denial, and moral performance all look godly but deny Christ's sufficiency. Don't confuse restriction with righteousness. True godliness begins in grace and overflows in gratitude. So how do we grow in that godliness?

### 3. Devote Yourself to Godly Training (4:6-16)

<sup>6</sup> If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. <sup>7</sup> Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; <sup>8</sup> for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. <sup>9</sup> The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. <sup>10</sup> For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. <sup>11</sup> Command and teach these things. <sup>12</sup> Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. <sup>13</sup> Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. <sup>14</sup> Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. <sup>15</sup> Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. <sup>16</sup> Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Gnosticism, duality; physical = bad; spiritual = good

**Words and Doctrine:** <sup>6</sup> If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.

- We see this aim of truth and doctrine again. We produce good servants of Christ by helping them know and understand him through his word.<sup>20</sup>
- Being trained literally means “being nourished in” (image of feeding and rearing children).<sup>21</sup>
  - “There is no better means of spiritual nourishment than a constant dwelling on the great truths of the faith.”
- If the *result* of our training program is becoming a good servant of Christ Jesus, then the nutrition plan is the words of faith and good teaching.
  - Studying your Bible and sitting under the preaching of the word are not *obligations* to prove your spirituality but *invitations* to feast on the Word of God.
  - After decades of ministry, I can tell you, the effects of missing out on Christian community, regular preaching, and gathered worship are profound. When neglected, faith grows weak and your appetites shift toward the world. **Spiritual malnutrition leads to spiritual weakness.**
  - Let’s imagine I’m on the XC team. But I skip practice, eat junk food, and never train, yet I still expect to show up on race day and crush it. At best, I limp to the finish; at worst, I’m curled up on the side of the course asking for my mom.
- <sup>13</sup> Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. God speaks clearly and consistently through the Bible. That’s why we make the Bible the center of our ministry.

**Avoid:** Training well not only means eating the right things, but also avoiding the wrong ones. It doesn’t matter how much grilled chicken you eat if you wash it down with a gallon of soda and three donuts. Or worse, how good is it to eat a protein bar if you dipped it in poison? Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths

- Irreverent<sup>22</sup> (godless, pointless, profane, blasphemous, worldly, religiously bankrupt). Be careful of those who make light of God.
- Silly<sup>23</sup> (wives’ tale, senile, frivolous, immature, superstitious). They loved this kind of thing in the 2TJ, magical amulets, etc. We do the same when we fall for superstitious thinking.
- Myths<sup>24</sup> (fables, tales, speculation, invented stories). 2TJ wrote fan fiction, creating speeches from OT patriarchs and testimonies from the angelic realm.
- All of this is spiritual junk food. What is the spiritual junk food of our day?
  - E.g., following celebrity pastors or Christian influencers instead of Christ. “Type ‘amen’ and you’ll be blessed.

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<sup>20</sup> τοῖς λόγοις τῆς πίστεως καὶ τῆς καλῆς διδασκαλίας

<sup>21</sup> Already been adapted into the educational sphere in Greco-Roman culture; “nourish, rear, bring up”

<sup>22</sup> βεβήλους

<sup>23</sup> γραῶδεις

<sup>24</sup> μύθους

**Training Regimen:** I have a friend who is a competitive bodybuilder. He follows a disciplined diet, adjusting it according to whether he is bulking or cutting. He goes to the gym with a rigorous workout plan. He posts his sets on social media. And that kind of bodily training has some value. But it's limited.

- The most dangerous idols are not those that are *evil*, but those that are good. For when we take something that is good and from God and make it ultimate, we can easily deceive ourselves into thinking that we are serving God when we are really worshiping a self-created idol (Satan disguises himself as an angel of light).
- Godliness has value now *and* for eternity. "Our great fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at something that doesn't really matter." For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? (Matt 16:26).
  - "I would rather be on the wrong side of history than the wrong side of eternity."
- Training is an active pursuit (e.g., toil and strive).<sup>25</sup> We derive the word "*gymnasium*" from it (γύμναζε). You no more drift into godliness than you drift into fitness. It takes discipline. But discipline is not a restriction to your joy, it is the path to your freedom.
- What are you training for? A life directed toward God or self.<sup>26</sup> Does the effort of your life (e.g., time, priorities, habits) show that your hope is set on the living God or some lesser thing?

**Control What You Can Control:** Paul knows that Timothy is a young leader (Let no one despise you for your youth). He can't change that. "When I turned two, I was really anxious because I'd doubled my age in a year and, I thought, if this keeps up, by the time I'm six I'll be ninety" (Steven Wright). "Being young is a fault that diminishes daily." However, he can avoid the typical pitfalls of youth (e.g., arrogance, carelessness, impulsiveness, inconsistency) by setting a good example through his **public behavior** (e.g., in speech, conduct) and **private character** (e.g., in love, faith, purity).

- He's not saying, "don't let anyone look down on you." He's saying, "Give them nothing to look down on."
- I always tell my kids there are two things they control in a situation: **attitude** and **effort**. Paul is saying, you can't control the outcome, but you can control the effort you put in (e.g., Practice these things, immerse yourself in them... Keep a close watch... Persist in this). Holiness is not a temporary duty but a permanent lifestyle.
- <sup>14</sup>Do not neglect the gift you have. All that God gives is a gift. If it's from God, then it's a good gift worth cultivating.<sup>27</sup>

**For Love and Mission:** <sup>6</sup>Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

- Watch your life and doctrine.<sup>28</sup> "Be more afraid of yourself than the world" (Butler).

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<sup>25</sup> κοπιῶμεν καὶ ἀγωνιζόμεθα

<sup>26</sup> In the Pastoral Epistles, godliness (Gk. εὐσέβεια) describes reverent devotion and a life oriented toward God, echoing the OT "fear of the Lord." It is the transformation from self-centered to God-centered living.

<sup>27</sup> "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands." (2 Tim 1:6).

<sup>28</sup> Watch Yo' Self

- What you proclaim and how you live are inseparable. Good doctrine without holiness is hypocrisy. Good behavior without faithful doctrine is self-righteous moralism.
- **The stakes are too high:** if you fail to pursue God, you not only lead *your* soul to destruction, but also *anyone* who follows you.
- But if you pursue the God of the gospel with joyful contentment, then the watching world will know the way to go.
  - This is why godliness matters. I pray that my life backs my message and it leads to others hearing the gospel and following Jesus (e.g., 8th grader calling to let me know he got saved, man free from alcohol addiction, sharing faith for the first time, reading the Bible, marriage restored, every believer walking in obedience of baptism, etc.)

### Conclusion:

- We're all training for something: career, comfort, success, approval. The question isn't *if* you're training, but what you're training for.
- In God's house, the target is clear: godliness. Not self-made discipline, but Christ-shaped devotion.
- Does the effort of your life (time, priorities, and habits) show that your hope is set on the living God or something less?