Staying on Course

Believers must be nourished on God’s Word so they will know the truth.

1 TIMOTHY 4:1-13

MEMORY VERSE: 1 TIMOTHY 4:13

READ 1 Timothy 3:14–4:16, First Thoughts (p. 44), and Understand the Context (pp. 44–45). Make notes on what Paul says believers must do as you read.

STUDY 1 Timothy 4:1-13, using Explore the Text (pp. 45–49). Familiarize yourself with PACK ITEM 5 (Poster: First-Century Heresies) and PACK ITEM 13 (Handout: First-Century Heresies) focusing on Gnosticism and legalism. Pay attention to the methods Paul recommended to Timothy for discerning and refuting false teaching.

PLAN your group time with a focus on the sufficiency of Scripture to teach us truth, while also considering how we benefit from prayer, the Holy Spirit, and community. Tailor the plans for your group using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 50–51), More Ideas (p. 52), and ideas included online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults.

GROW with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).

GATHER the following items: ☐ Personal Study Guides; and ☐ A variety of snacks for the group. (Be mindful of food allergies or other special dietary concerns.) Prepare to display the following Pack Items: ☐ PACK ITEM 5 (Poster: First-Century Heresies); and ☐ PACK ITEM 6 (Key Verse: 2 Timothy 2:15). Make copies for the group of: ☐ PACK ITEM 8 (Handout: Memory Verse Bookmark); and ☐ PACK ITEM 13 (Handout: First-Century Heresies).
FIRST THOUGHTS

Our world is filled with scam artists and people bending the truth for their own benefit. We should carefully examine the claims a person makes, especially when they want access to our money. In the same way, the devil continues to sell beliefs and behavior that either deny or twist the message of the gospel. It is imperative for followers of Christ to be aware of distorted beliefs and deceptive doctrines. We must be equipped by God’s Word and stay the course of true faith.

(In PSG, p. 37) Have you ever been the victim of a scam or false advertisement? How did you respond in the future to other “can’t miss” opportunities?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 TIMOTHY 3:14–4:16

Paul wrote this letter while visiting Macedonia. He had left Timothy in Ephesus to help the church gain more solid ground in doctrine and Christian living. While Paul hoped to rejoin Timothy, he knew that much needed to be done in the meantime. He wanted the believers to know how to behave not only in church, but as the church. Spiritual growth was important not only for the people’s sakes, but for the reputation of the “church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).

The basis for Christian faith and practice lay in the mystery of godliness, which Paul defined as none other than Jesus Himself. Paul used the concept of mystery several ways on different occasions. Earlier in this letter, he addressed the mystery of the faith (1 Tim. 3:9). In his epistle to the Colossians, Paul wrote about the hidden mystery regarding the gospel and the Gentiles (Col. 1:27). In the current context, Paul shared what probably was an early confession of faith regarding Jesus (1 Tim. 3:16). True godliness, then, involves believing, living, and proclaiming the gospel of Christ.

Proper orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right behavior) were vital as the church encountered opposition from a demonically influenced world. Paul warned about the false teachers that not only would arise in the later days, but were already afflicting believers. Hypocritically demanding of others what they would not endure themselves, these phony prophets claimed to be defenders of the Jewish Law. In reality, they were subvertors of both law and grace.

Paul saw Timothy as his son in the ministry and, as such, wanted his protégé to succeed as a good minister of Jesus Christ. As opposed to speculation and myths, Timothy’s teaching should focus on godliness so the people could place their hope securely in Christ alone.
Timothy had a gift for preaching and teaching, but Paul did not leave him in Ephesus only to teach. He wanted Timothy to be an example of how to live for Christ. Timothy was to give careful attention to his life and his teaching. Persevering in both would not only benefit his hearers, but himself.

**EXPLORE THE TEXT**

**BE AWARE (1 TIM. 4:1-5)**

**VERSE 1**

Paul based his advice to Timothy not on human understanding but the inspiration of the Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit leads His people into truth (John 16:13) and inspires all Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16), Paul was speaking under His guidance.

The *later times* would be marked by deceptive teachers. Many first-century Christians believed they were living in the later times. That perception was true in some respects, but the phrase can also refer to the end of time before Christ returns. The church understood the last times as beginning with the first advent of Christ and continuing until His Second Coming. Since Paul was warning about false teachers among the churches and the effects of their seductive work, he obviously used the term to describe the current situation.

Identification of the reference for the pronoun *some* is important. If we interpret this term to mean believers, the verse could mean that it is possible for Christians to depart from the faith, as in losing their salvation. However, such is not accurate either from a syntactical or doctrinal position. Reading this verse in context identifies the term *some* with the persons mentioned in the verses 2-3. Therefore, Paul meant the false teachers had departed from the teachings of the true faith and followed deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons. Instead of teaching God’s truth, they had chosen Satan’s lies.

John later wrote about discerning between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1 John 4:6). Some scholars interpret the deceitful spirits as being the false teachers themselves. However, the text is best understood in its most simple interpretation—the false teachers had yielded to deceiving spirits and demonic doctrine.

**VERSE 2**

The agency for such deception involved the hypocrisy of liars. The false teachers of Ephesus were like the kinds of persons Jesus described—eager to place burdens on others that they were not willing to bear for themselves (Matt. 23:1-4). Isaiah equated hypocrites with persons who practiced vile iniquity (Isa. 32:6). Jesus associated these kinds of people with the devil, the father of lies (John 8:44).

The most cunning liars feel no shame because their consciences are seared. This word picture portrays persons who no longer could distinguish between right and wrong. They had lied so many times that their moral compass failed to influence them.
VERSES 3-5

3 They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods that God created to be received with gratitude by those who believe and know the truth. 4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 5 since it is sanctified by the word of God and by prayer.

VERSES 3-5

Two examples of deceptive teaching afflicting the Ephesians involved the forbidding of marriage and the abstinence from certain foods. Represented by the term they, the persons guilty of this spiritual arrogance were the liars mentioned in the previous verse.

Paul was on record as encouraging some people to remain single in order to serve Christ (1 Cor. 7:7). At the same time, he encouraged people to marry in fulfillment of God’s purpose for the family (1 Cor. 7:1-9). Apparently, some of the false teachers were forbidding people to marry at all.

A second area of deceptive doctrine involved the kinds of foods believers could eat. This could refer to either or both of two situations that Paul encountered in Gentile churches. In some places, Jewish Christians from Jerusalem demanded that Gentile Christians observe the dietary restrictions of Judaic law. At Corinth, the issue focused on whether believers should eat meat that had been first offered to idols and then sold in the marketplace. (See 1 Cor. 8.)

Paul declared that God created various food sources to be received with gratitude. His reference to persons who believe and know the truth coincides with other passages about eating in faith. (See 1 Cor. 10:23-30.) Mature Christians not only have faith in the truth, but they know it experientially. They apply God’s truth in all aspects of daily life.

Continuing the emphasis of verse 3, Paul reiterated in verse 4 that everything created by God is good. His point was to counteract the false teaching of Judaizers and others regarding what believers could eat. Modern readers should not take this statement beyond its context and try to apply it as a license for inordinate behavior. Paul again focused on the way food was to be received with thanksgiving. Offering thanks with one’s meal should not be a mere formality but a genuine acknowledgment that our sustenance comes from the Lord.

The idea that food can be sanctified might be confusing if we associate this term with the way it applies to the sanctification of believers. The word itself simply means “to be separated or set aside,” usually for God. In the current context, Paul saw food as having a role in fulfilling God’s purpose as it is set apart for God by strengthening the believer’s body.

We can make even the simple act of eating an aspect of worship.

When we offer a prayer of thanksgiving over a meal, we acknowledge God as the source and His service as the purpose of His provision. As such, we can make even the simple act of eating an aspect of worship.

Paul’s inclusion of the phrase the word of God presents a more difficult interpretation. Some writers think early Christians offered a Scripture quotation along with their prayers before they ate. In any case, Paul’s emphasis was that believers should engage in dietary habits that are consistent with God’s Word. We must be aware that false teachers will try to lead us astray. By maintaining clear consciences and following God’s Word, we can discern between the true and the false.
How can you help others be aware of false teachers and avoid their deception?

**BE DISCIPLINED** (1 Tim. 4:6-10)

**VERSE 6**

Paul was not suggesting Timothy was not already a good servant of Christ Jesus. Instead, he was encouraging his son in the ministry to do what was already in his heart—to teach these things, the truths of the gospel, to the brothers and sisters. Although Timothy was a pastor of the church, his ultimate service was to Christ Jesus.

The good servant of Christ Jesus is nourished by the words of the faith and the good teaching that Timothy had been following. Notice the wording of the first phrase. Servants of Jesus are nourished not merely by words of faith, but words of the faith, meaning the gospel. They also are nourished by good teaching. The term includes sound doctrine. Timothy not only had been taught the Scriptures since he had been a child (2 Tim. 3:14-15), but also he had followed them. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul commended his protégé for faithfully following his teaching and accepting the afflictions that came from doing so (2 Tim. 3:10-11).

**VERSES 7-10**

In contrast to sound doctrine were the pointless and silly myths that Paul had already referenced as a problem in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:4). When he advised Timothy to have nothing to do with such things, Paul was not saying Timothy had become embroiled with these false teachings. He wanted Timothy not to spend his time engaged with these pointless arguments.

As opposed to the futility of silly myths, Timothy should train himself in godliness. The word train means to discipline oneself. Timothy should focus on developing godliness in his life and in the lives of the Ephesian believers. The idea of training was similar to the regimen an athlete endures to prepare for competition. Using this metaphor for illustration, Paul noted that the training of the body has limited benefit. He was not saying people should not take care of their physical well being. Instead, Paul contrasted physical discipline with godliness. While the first is somewhat helpful, the latter is beneficial in every way. Physical development benefits participants temporally, but godliness holds promise not only for the present life but also for the life to come.

The phrase this saying in verse 9 refers to Paul’s admonition in the previous verses about godliness. Such a statement was trustworthy and deserved full acceptance. The phrase for this reason in verse 10 could tie what follows to Paul’s previous statement regarding the benefit of godliness. The term we included Paul and Timothy, who together would labor and strive in ministering the gospel. Service to Christ and His church involves work and effort.

**VERSE 6**

6 If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished by the words of the faith and the good teaching that you have followed.

**VERSES 7-10**

7 But have nothing to do with pointless and silly myths. Rather, train yourself in godliness. 8 For the training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. 9 This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance. 10 For this reason we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.
Paul and Timothy worked because of their \textit{hope}, which was not in any human agency but \textit{in the living God}. Believers have hope because our God is not an inanimate idol made by human hands, but He is alive and involved in our lives.

Our hope is also in the fact that God is \textit{the Savior of all people}. This statement does not mean that all people will be saved. Such an interpretation would be contrary to other Scriptures. (See Matt. 7:13-23.) Scholars suggest several understandings of the phrase \textit{of all people}. One interpretation takes the word \textit{Savior} to mean “preserver.” Another reading emphasizes God has the means of salvation for all people through Christ. Sadly, many refuse His gift and reject Christ. The latter may be why Paul added the qualifying phrase \textit{especially of those who believe}.

(In PSG, p. 43) \textbf{What makes godliness a difficult discipline? How does the commitment to discipline yourself in godliness fit into your priorities?}

\section*{BE AN EXAMPLE (1 TIM. 4:11-13)}

\textbf{VERSES 11-12}

11 Command and teach these things. 12 Don't let anyone despise your youth, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.

How does a young pastor gain the respect of a more mature audience?

How does a young pastor gain the respect of a more mature audience? Paul urged Timothy to \textit{set an example for the believers}. Timothy's personal conduct would validate the truth of his words. The five areas mentioned in verse 12 were not meant to be an exhaustive list but represented ways the young pastor could show other believers how to behave.

Being an example \textit{in speech} meant not only what Timothy preached but also how he said it. Ministers are to speak in such a way that brings credit to the substance of what they say. Likewise, all Christians are to be careful of the way they speak.
Being an example in conduct certainly included all the qualifications for a minister previously mentioned. However, this idea goes further to include behavior that makes up a person’s character. Whether in public or in private, believers should act as people of God. In this case, the focus is not merely on ministers, but the conduct of all believers.

Being an example in love has obvious implications. People would be known as followers of Jesus by the love they had toward one another. (See John 13:35.) Of all the commands regarding how believers should treat one another, the most common and important was to love one another.

Being an example in faith does not mean “the faith,” but in the demonstration of trusting God. Taking God at His word involves carrying out His commands as well as believing Him for His blessings.

Being an example in purity was not intended to imply that, as a young man, Timothy was more subject to sins of the flesh than anyone else. Rather, Paul wanted Timothy to show his life was beyond reproach morally. In the same way, all believers are to live pure and holy lives before the Lord.

VERSE 13
Paul anticipated seeing Timothy again. Until then, Timothy should give attention to three primary aspects of his pastoral ministry. Public reading referred to the reading of Scripture, likely as part of the worship service. The canon of New Testament texts had not been gathered yet, so the reading probably involved Old Testament scrolls. However, as Paul instructed churches to read his letters, the public reading could have included one or more of Paul’s epistles or other New Testament writings. (See 1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16.)

Exhortation began with the truth of scriptural texts and involved strong encouragement of people to believe and behave according to the Word. The previous adjective public could apply to the word exhortation as well. Timothy apparently had a gift for preaching. Paul wanted Timothy to exercise this gift for the benefit of the church and the advancement of the gospel. (See 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6.)

Teaching may have been the instructive part of the church’s worship. However, it also could imply the disciplemaking aspect of pastoral ministry. Both publicly and personally, Timothy was to teach not only the doctrinal truths of Scripture but also their practical application in life.

Like Timothy, believers must remain focused on God’s Word to be examples of godly living. As we live out the gospel among other believers and before the world, we encourage one another and bear witness to our Lord Jesus Christ.

(In PSG, p. 44) In what ways could you be an example for believers, beginning in your home?

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LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: Bring in a variety of snacks for the group to enjoy—some healthy and some with less nutritional value. Being careful not to criticize anyone’s eating habits, lead the group to discuss which of the snacks are the most nourishing. Ask: Have you ever been misled into thinking something was healthy when it wasn’t? Say: While it’s fine to snack on a variety of foods, in order to be physically healthy, we must be nourished on food with nutritional value. Similarly, believers must be nourished on God’s Word to stay spiritually healthy.

TRANSITION: State from the paragraph on page 37 of the PSG: It is imperative for followers of Christ to be aware of distorted beliefs and deceptive doctrines. We must be equipped by God’s Word and stay the course of true faith.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: As a volunteer reads 1 Timothy 4:1-5, direct the group to pay attention to how Paul described false teachers and false doctrine.

ILLUSTRATE: Point to Pack Item 5 (Poster: First-Century Heresies) displayed in the room. Distribute copies of Pack Item 13 (Handout: First-Century Heresies). Then use the handout to briefly explain what a heresy is and to discuss the heresies facing the first-century churches. Call for examples of each type of heresy facing the first-century churches.

DISCUSS: How does sin desensitize a person to truth? What other factors might desensitize a person to truth? (PSG, p. 41)

ANALYZE: Lead the group to consider how the practices listed in 1 Timothy 4:3-4 were antithetical to the truth of the gospel. Read the following sentence from the PSG (p. 40): The false teachers promoted a legalism that minimized God’s grace and maximized man’s rules.

EMPHASIZE: Invite a volunteer to reread verse 4. Ask: How can an attitude of thanksgiving prevent abuse of God’s good gifts? How can thanksgiving prevent denial of God’s good gifts?

READ: Direct the group to silently read 1 Timothy 4:6-10, looking for ways Paul used physical metaphors to speak about spiritual things.

EXPLAIN: In verses 1-5, Paul warned against false teachers. In verses 6-10, Paul’s focus shifted to encouragement. While Paul wanted Timothy to be wary of false teachers, he also wanted him focused on growing in godliness. Instead of turning to speculative teachings, believers are to focus on godliness and the gospel.

ASK: What makes godliness a difficult discipline? How does the commitment to discipline yourself in godliness fit into your priorities? (PSG, p. 43)

DISCUSS: How can we reconcile God’s free gift of grace with concepts of “training,” “striving,” and “laboring”? Direct the group to the following sentences in the PSG (p. 42): We don’t labor to earn God’s favor but rather because we have received God’s grace.
MINI-LECTURE: Briefly explain that verse 10 points to God’s goodness to all: God is the Provider, Preserver, and Sustainer of all. His salvation is available to all but effective only to those who believe. Refer to the last paragraph under verse 10 in the PSG (p. 42).

READ: As a volunteer reads 1 Timothy 4:11-13, encourage the group to consider this question: Is the Word of God sufficient?

DEBATE: Challenge the group to defend the sufficiency of Scripture. Ask: Can the Word of God convince and thrive without godly examples? Why or why not? What’s the importance of godly examples in sharing the gospel? Affirm the sufficiency of Scripture, referencing 2 Timothy 3:15-17: While Scripture is sufficient, God has also called believers to set a good example, as outlined in 1 Timothy 4:11-13.

ASK: How has today’s discussion affected your answer to the question on page 44 of the PSG?

PRESENT: Timothy was in his twenties or thirties, which was considered very young for a leadership position. While Paul affirmed Timothy as a leader, he placed the responsibility of defending himself on Timothy. Paul exhorted Timothy not to let others look down on him and to set an example.

DISPLAY: Point to Pack Item 6 (Key Verse: 2 Timothy 2:15). After the group reflects on the verse, ask: What responsibility do believers have to defend their gospel witness? How did Paul expect believers to be able to defend that witness?

EMPHASIZE: The focus of our defense is on knowing God’s Word. Direct someone to read the Key Doctrine (Scripture) on page 44 of the PSG.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Reread 1 Timothy 4:1. Remind the group that heresies, false teachings, and misinterpretations must be avoided. Guide the group in recalling how today’s focal verses equip us to identify and resist false teaching: Verses 1-5 warn against a conscience that has been desensitized to the Holy Spirit and encourages a spirit of thanksgiving. Verses 6-10 focus on training toward godliness and being nourished on God’s Word. Verses 11-13 remind believers to read Scripture and follow trusted teaching, while also setting a good example.

DISPLAY: Call for volunteers to name one action they will take this week as a result of today’s study.

RESPOND: Guide the group through the second question set under In My Context in the PSG (p. 45): Discuss as a group ways of engaging each other in discussions about theology, including false doctrines. How can the group serve as a means for discovering false teachings?

CHALLENGE: Encourage the group to pray through 1 Timothy 4:13 this week, asking God to reveal an area that they should focus on improving in the example they set. Have copies of Pack Item 8 (Handout: Memory Verse Bookmark) ready to give to those who need one.

PRAY: Close in prayer, thanking God for the goodness and sufficiency of His revealed Word. Ask that He would guide the group in faithful and correct understanding of Scripture.
PRACTICE

• Pray through 1 Timothy 4:13. Ask God to reveal any areas where your witness needs strengthening.
• Consider ways you can continue to foster healthy theological discussions with your group.
• Were there any theological questions raised this week that warrant more discussion, either as a group or with individuals? If you don’t have the resources for studying these, reach out to a leader or pastor at your church for suggestions.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As the group arrives, write the following categories at the top of a board: Essentials, Convictions, and Preferences. Ask: What’s the difference between each of these categories when it comes to theology and the church? Encourage the group to look up definitions of each word to help distinguish the categories. Ask: How should believers respond to disagreements within each of these categories? What sources can we turn to when distinguishing truth from false teaching? Point out that disagreements regarding preferences don’t always warrant our time and energy, while essentials are based on non-negotiable truths that must be followed.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

• For further study of 1 Timothy 4:1-4, lead the group to complete the Bible Skill found in the PSG (p. 41): To understand the term “later times,” compare Paul’s description in 1 Timothy 4:1-4 with the following passages: 2 Timothy 3:1-9; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12; 2 Peter 3:3-7; and Jude 1:18-19. Write a summary of what you discover. Compare the above passages with Hebrews 1:1-3. How does this comparison add to your understanding of later times? How does your concept affect your daily decisions and conduct of life?
• To enhance the discussion of godliness in 1 Timothy 4:8, explain: Paul states that godliness has value both in the present life and in the life to come. Draw an attitude scale with the left representing value for the present life and the right representing value for the life to come. Ask: How does godliness impact the present life? The life to come? Lead the group to consider which type of promises they tend to be more focused on and note where they fall on the scale. Discuss: What are pitfalls in focusing too much on one or the other?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Encourage the group to look back through each Scripture division and share something revealed about God from each section.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Believers must value sound doctrine. Encourage your group to sing along to “This I Believe (The Creed),” by Hillsong Worship, affirming truths of the Word.