

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## A Godly Example

*Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.* (1 Timothy 4:12, KJV 1900)

As we move through First Timothy the fourth chapter, we should keep clearly in our minds that we have not left Paul's admonition to Timothy in First Timothy 3:15, good conduct, behavior, in the house of God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

Almost to the point of stereotype, people in our culture put down young people as foolish, empty headed, and self-centered. Are there some young people who match the stereotype? Indeed, there are. Stereotypes grow out of common behavior. However, I protest that such stereotyping is appropriate, or, for that matter, that it is always accurate. I know young men and women who exemplify wise and mature judgment and self-control. Scripture describes godly young people in a vastly different way; "...plants grown up in their youth..." (Psalm 144:12), and "...as corner stones, polished after the similitude of a palace." (Psalm 144:12; David associates the mature plants to young, mature men, and he associates the polished, refined, palace corner stones to godly, mature young women). First century Jewish culture regarded a youth at thirteen to fifteen as technically an adult. It was not at all uncommon for young women of this age to marry. However, when Scripture associates age to public responsibility, it seems to require a more mature age, say around twenty-five to thirty. (Luke 3:23)

It appears that Timothy; though at the time of this writing he was writing was ordained and serving as pastor of a local church, may have been significantly younger than thirty, perhaps in his late teens or early twenties. We have nothing specific regarding his age in Scripture other than this verse that identifies him as surprisingly young for his responsible office in the church. He was sufficiently young that an older person could have easily dismissed his teaching as being merely misguided zeal and an arrogant, over-inflated ego, not sound truth. Considering that danger, Paul instructs Timothy to so live that even his critics could not make such a charge stick against him. When I was ordained, I was in my late teens, and the man who preached my ordination charge (Elder Gene Thomas) included this passage and some very clear instructions to me. I look back and realize that I didn't follow his counsel nearly as faithfully as I should have, but, thanks to him and a couple of other very wise and godly people in my life at that time, I did mature. Smiling, I realize quite fully that I

am no longer "Little Joe." In the process of this maturing, the Lord gave me older, patient, and wise preachers (Elder Thomas, my uncle, Elder J. D. Holder, and Elder J. M. Bullard). However, I could not graduate till I moved to California and married a young lady who, far more than I, lived up to her Psalm 144 model. She cut me no slack and refused to allow me to stick in perpetual adolescence. She nudged me consistently, but with obvious love, till I did grow up. Thank the Lord for such strong, godly women who model their lives after Scripture, not after faulty societal norms. She refused to play the deceitful game of pretending submission, while smugly claiming to be the neck that always controlled what the head does. "Sandra school" included a tough curriculum, but graduation carried value and meaning.

Though I didn't always live up to my personal expectations of maturity, as a young pastor, the example of these wise mentors did weigh substantially on me. I fully realized that I could not hold before men and women two or three times my age a personal example of godly conduct in the heat of trial. At times I'd acknowledge that point, but I tried then, as I try now, to point people to the example of Scripture and urge them to follow that example. The Biblical example is quite old and credible; it should be; it came from God to us.

Paul didn't tell Timothy to rebuke older members with a self-serving, "Don't forget. Despite my youth, I am your 'presbyter,' your spiritual leader. God requires you to obey me." He gave Timothy a far healthier and wiser model of spiritual leadership.

1. ...*be thou an example of the believers....* A faithful minister of the gospel leads by example, not by words alone. Peter teaches the same principle. (1 Peter 5:1-3) He *models* wise, loving, godly conduct by personal actions. ***A man cannot rise in the pulpit any higher than his feet walk.***
2. ...*in word....* His words should affirm his "foot-message." We may look up a given word in a dictionary, but can we always interpret how someone intended that word by the mere collection of words in the dictionary. What body language did he show when he spoke the word? What did you pick up in his voice inflections? You might interpret his use of the word one way

by reading or repeating only the single sentence in which he used the word, but, based on the extended context of his speaking or conversation, how do you interpret his use of the word? Scripture regularly reminds us that God holds us responsible and accountable, not only for what we say and do, but for our motives as well. We may think we know a person's motives, but we cannot possibly be sure. God alone knows a person's motives, so God alone will administer His judgment. That said, we can contribute immensely to how people interpret our words by our life and attitude. In Philippians 4:5, Paul wrote, "Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand." Paul included at least two major points in this verse. First of all, we all have our collection of sincere convictions, but we wisely keep many of them to ourselves. We could hardly discuss them with anyone and not alarm them that our views or thoughts were somewhat extreme. Paul didn't teach us to make all of those thoughts or ideas known. He defined—and confined—appropriate dialogue to thoughts and ideas that we may comfortably describe as "moderation." Someone has defined Paul's use of this word here as "...sweet reasonableness..." I have occasionally encountered preachers who seem inclined to seek out the most extreme, bizarre, and alarming things possible to say from the pulpit. Such irresponsible use of the pulpit violates this passage, not to mention many others. Occasionally equally sincere believers will use a similar tactic in private conversation, saying things that they should know—I suspect that they do know—would prompt shock and alarm in the minds of their hearers. "Shock value" of an expression may get someone's attention, but it may also get God's attention. He commands that we restrain our words to "moderation," to "...sweet reasonableness..." It is common for immature young people to consciously throw out shock-value terms or words, and then sit back and be entertained by the alarm with which adults react to their words. Such behavior reveals immaturity, regardless of the age of the speaker/writer. Paul urged Timothy to extend his "...example of the believers..." to his words. How people viewed Timothy would predict how they would react to his preaching and pastoring. If they viewed him as extreme, unreasonable, or immature, they'd patronize him and his preaching, instead of taking it seriously. Timothy, be a godly example. The same scales weigh every one of us with every word and attitude that

we communicate to others. How consistently do we refine and filter our words through the sieve of moderation, of "...sweet reasonableness..."?

3. ...*in conversation*.... Conversation in Scripture often includes far more than words. Not only do we "talk" with our voice, but we also talk with our feet, with our hands, with our faces, with our eyes, and even with our ears. One New Testament dictionary, Louw-Nida, includes "...overt daily behavior..." in his definition. No doubt the word includes what comes out of our mouth, but it covers far more. In every area of Timothy's "persona" that might communicate his faith and maturity—or lack thereof—to any who would hear him preach the gospel, Paul requires him to practice mature, exemplary conduct.

We'll save the remaining four categories of Paul's godly example instruction to Timothy, Lord willing, for future studies. The first two admonitions deal with our words, either specifically or in an extended fashion. The remaining four areas of exemplary living relate to specific conduct and attitude.

We often discover, all too often and all too late, that words we've spoken would have been far better not uttered at all. Jesus rebuked first century Jews who focused all their religious assessments on personal performance, on self, that the things that defile us before God have far more to do with the words that we send out of our mouths than with the food that we put into our mouths.

Somewhere many years ago, I read an instructive anecdotal story regarding our words. A young man had a heated disagreement with a friend and, during the heat of the moment, said harsh, bitter things about his friend to most of the people in the little village where both men lived. He went to his pastor and confessed his sin. With no explanation, the pastor told the young man to tear open a feather pillow and to walk through the village, leaving a feather at the door of every home where anyone lived to whom he had spoken those angry words about his friend. The young man complied and reported back to his pastor. "Now," said the pastor, "I want you to go back through the village and collect every single feather that you left at those doors." The young man protested, "That is impossible! As soon as I put the feather at the door, the wind blew it away." The pastor wisely agreed, "And so, young man, the winds of people's tongues to whom you spoke those words have already spread your angry words far and wide. You cannot do anything to retrieve your foolish and angry words." Learn this lesson so that you will not be so quick to speak out of anger in the future. Paul indeed has taught us wisely regarding the "Lesson of the Feathers." Are we listening? Have we learned how to be an example to the believers in "...sweet reasonableness..."?

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Worship service each Sunday  
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10:30 A. M.  
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