

'MATURE MINISTRY FLOWS  
FROM A MATURE CHARACTER,  
FORMED IN THE GRADUATE  
SCHOOL OF LIFE.'

**ROBERT CLINTON**

# **CHAPTER SIX**

**AN APPROVED WORKMAN: THE CHALLENGE FOR LEADERS**



*'Do your best to present yourself to God  
as one approved, a workman  
who does not need to be ashamed  
and who correctly handles the word of truth.'*

2 TIMOTHY 2:15

## OUT OF MY DEPTH IN THE DESERT

I still remember receiving the phone call as I was driving to my office in Cape Town early in 2003. The international director of our organisation called from the US and told me of an opportunity to take a Christian football team to Sudan, at the invitation of the Sudanese government. This wasn't to be just any football team, but a team of professional players who would play against the Sudanese national team. I was being asked to help facilitate and direct the whole tour. Still in my mid-twenties I was perhaps too naïve – or too excited – to consider the size of the task.

The team comprised professional players coming from the US, UK, and several Africa nations, and a partnership with other organisations was forged to make this happen. I had no experience of working in a country like Sudan which, in 2003, was at the tail end of a civil war that had lasted 20 years resulting in an estimated two million deaths, and was known as a hub for many terrorist organisations. This goodwill tour was intended to paint a different picture to the world – one of tolerance and friendliness, a country preparing for peace. And what better way to accomplish this than through sport, specifically football? The outcome of the tour is a story for another day but, for me personally, it was one of the most

difficult and challenging projects I've ever been commissioned to fulfil. I learned a lot about myself through it all. In particular I learned about my shortcomings and insecurities in leadership. Although on the surface the tour appeared a big success, behind the scenes it took its toll on me as I felt out of my depth and grappled with God throughout the whole experience. The only thing that kept me going was the encouragement that came from one of the team members at one of the prayer meetings during the trip. He said he felt that God wanted to affirm that I had been faithful and I needed to hear the words 'well done'. I accepted this by faith, but truth be told, I felt my inadequacies in leadership were sorely exposed by this literal 'desert' experience.

There's nothing like being thrown in at the deep end in order to have your leadership mettle tested. The most important lessons are often learned in the school of hard knocks. The road to becoming an approved workman for God will be tough and challenging, but, as Paul demonstrates, the harder, less-travelled road is the one which will be most fruitful. Paul knew that his mentee would also have to travel his own challenging road if he were to become the leader God intended him to be.

## **CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT 101**

My children, Caleb, Sammy and Erin, love to grow sunflowers. They dry the seeds from previous sunflowers and then plant them in the garden, watching them grow over a period of weeks. Eventually the flowers blossom into their full glory and the bright yellow petals stretch towards the heavens.

One year, several sunflowers bloomed simultaneously – each of them between 1.5 and 2 metres tall. They were amazingly beautiful. But there was a storm that night and by the morning, each of the sunflowers was bowed low to the ground, bent at the bottom of their stems and beyond recovery. The elongated stems which had grown so quickly, with a limited root system beneath the surface, were no match for the strong winds that buffeted our garden that night. When compared to the trees in our garden with their trunks and roots established over dozens of years, the sunflowers – beautiful though they were for a time – were ill-equipped for long-term splendour.

Many leaders quickly gain positions of influence and seem to display incredible gifts and talents that put them into the spotlight. However Paul knew that in order to withstand the storms that will frequently buffet an emerging leader, godly character developed and tested over a long period of time was of utmost importance. And he knew that godly character was intrinsically linked to the injunction he gave that leaders must be able to *‘correctly handle the word of truth’*.<sup>2</sup>

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Earlier in his letter to Timothy, Paul had instructed his mentee ‘to fan into flame’ the gift which God had given him (2 TIMOTHY 1:6). For Timothy, that undoubtedly included a public leadership and teaching ministry. But the instruction to fan into flame the gifts of God are not in isolation from Paul’s instructions concerning Timothy’s inner character development. In other words, to grow in his public teaching ministry, Timothy must also tend to his private attitudes and

actions. In essence, Paul's call to Timothy is to fulfil the old cliché to 'practise what he preaches.' Paul clearly sees this as not just a pithy statement, but core to the integrity of Timothy's ministry and something that needs to be diligently nurtured if he is to have a fruitful ministry. Paul knew that if Timothy was to reach his full leadership potential he would have to pay these school fees. It was one thing for Timothy to travel as Paul's companion and play a supportive role to his mentor. But Paul knew that it's only at the coalface that workmen show their true worth as they get their hands dirty for the cause. It is quite clear that Paul viewed Timothy's effectiveness in ministry as directly proportional to his character development and Paul sought opportunities to test Timothy's leadership mettle and allow his character to develop.

## **CHARACTERLESS LEADERS: THE HYMENAEUS AND PHILETUS SYNDROME**

In 2006, I was with a group of South African pastors in Germany for the FIFA football World Cup. We were seeking to gain valuable experience in preparation for hosting the 2010 FIFA World Cup – the goal was to learn from churches in Germany as we prepared to utilise this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to mobilise the South African church for community outreach. It was an amazing opportunity for me to spend time with mature Christian leaders who otherwise were in high demand and extremely busy. I particularly remember one nugget that one of these pastors shared during our daily devotions: 'We need to be careful that leaders' gifts don't take them where their character can't keep them.'

The problem of characterless leaders is rampant in the world today – both inside and outside the church. The culture of celebrity has burgeoned in the last twenty years in proportion to an increasingly connected world and the growing popularity of ‘reality’-style entertainment and media. In no previous generation have people been able to access the limelight so easily and create an almost instant following. The celebrity culture adorns those with mediocre talent a garland of fame while completely disregarding their character. In fact, those with dubious character are more likely to gain the attention of reality show producers precisely because of the interest they will generate for that particular show. Sadly, this celebrity culture has also infiltrated the church. Increasingly, leaders are able to gain followers based upon their public performances and are not held accountable for their private lives, sometimes because it is believed that success and fame are a sign of God’s blessing.

Paul had personally experienced the threat to the church caused by characterless leaders. In the verses following his instruction to Timothy to present himself as a ‘workman approved’, he cites the damage done by Hymenaeus and Philetus. They had ‘wandered from the truth’ and he describes their negative impact as *‘spreading like*

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*gangrene’ (2 TIMOTHY 2:17-18).* The connection between character and ministry is clearly demonstrated by Paul in this case: these two men typified the syndrome that those whose private life is not in line with God’s Word will ultimately lead others astray in their public ministry. The influence of these people is like

a spiritual cancer that overcomes and devours the good cells, leaving a spiritually diseased body.

Hymeneaeus and Philetus were perhaps two influential and popular teachers who began to see their popularity rise through modifying their message.<sup>3</sup> Or perhaps they were pliable in their faith and easily influenced away from the core truths of the gospel. Whatever we surmise, they were clearly not following Paul's recipe for 'an approved workman', which is summarised in his instruction to Timothy: *'Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart'* (2 TIMOTHY 2:22).

Paul knew that, in order for Timothy to not go the way of Hymenaeus and Philetus, he would need a depth of character that would hold him steady in the storm. To use another metaphor, this character needed to be tested and developed at the coalface.

## I AM SENDING YOU TIMOTHY...

Early in Timothy's ministry, Paul found a great assignment for Timothy that demonstrated his confidence in his mentee, while at the same time undoubtedly stretching Timothy's faith and testing his character – he sent him as his representative to Corinth.

To be fair, Paul didn't immediately throw Timothy in at the deep end. His first assignment apart from Paul was with the 'noble' and 'eager' Bereans (see ACTS 17:10-15). Following



their time there, Paul requested that Timothy stay on with Silas in order to offer further encouragement to these brothers while he advanced to Athens **(17:10FF)**. Timothy's next assignment would be on an altogether different level, as Paul's ambassador to the volatile church in Corinth. In a jam-packed few chapters **(ACTS 18-20)**, Luke tells of Paul's visit to Corinth and the church that was planted in the very significant city on the outskirts of Greece. As a trading port, Corinth was known for its commerce and diverse cultures. But it was equally famous – or infamous perhaps – as a city full of temples with sexually immoral practices in honour of gods such as Aphrodite. Timothy joined Paul in Corinth and saw the church birthed over an 18-month period. Following this, Timothy travelled with Paul to Ephesus and again experienced the impact of the gospel against fierce opposition. During his time in Ephesus, Paul commissioned Timothy to return to Macedonia (possibly firstly to those nice Bereans again) together with Erastus, a citizen of Corinth **(19:22)**. Their final destination was Corinth itself.

Paul sent Timothy to Corinth as his special envoy, carrying with him the letter we now know as 1 Corinthians. Paul wrote this letter while in Ephesus and was responding to a letter he had received from the church in Corinth. Unable to visit Corinth immediately, he wrote the letter to deal with the issues the Corinthians raised and sent Timothy not only as his postman but also as his mouthpiece.

The letter deals with a whole host of issues ranging from factions, immorality and false teaching that were plaguing the young church. Just as I find it almost impossible to deal with serious issues via email because the tone and intent can

be completely misunderstood or misrepresented, so Paul recognised that letter-writing had numerous shortcomings. He was probably in something of a personal dilemma and desired to get to Corinth, while at the same time recognising he still had to complete his work in Ephesus **(1 CORINTHIANS 16:8-9)**. His solution to this problem was to send his young protégé to represent him.

I'm sure Timothy had a lump in his throat when Paul told him that he was to go to Corinth. He would have also heard word that the church was struggling and imagined that maybe Paul would change plans and head straight to Corinth to sort things out. But Paul had simply sent a letter... and the letter stated, *'I am sending to you Timothy...'* and he had even bigged Timothy up: *'He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in the church'* **(1 CORINTHIANS 4:17)**.

Perhaps this was simply too much to ask of Timothy the Timid... and the lump turned 'melonesque' as he journeyed from the security of Macedonia into the landmine of Corinth! Paul even seems to have perhaps had some concerns as to how Timothy will be received by the brothers and sisters in Corinth as towards the end of the letter to the Corinthians, he adds:

*'If Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for his is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. No one then should refuse to accept him. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers'* **(1 CORINTHIANS 16:10-11)**.

In these words we see Paul demonstrating one of the qualities of a good mentor as he watches his spiritual son's back, perhaps aware he might be sending his protégé like a lamb amongst wolves. Perhaps he was also concerned that Timothy's timidity would get the better of him. What exactly happened in Corinth is unknown. But we can infer that Timothy's mission went well for a couple of reasons. Firstly, Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church indicates that things had turned around in the church. He actually introduces the letter as from himself and Timothy, from which we can infer that Timothy must by then have been held in high regard in the church. Secondly, Paul's ongoing trust in Timothy intimates that he came through this severe test without blemish and not having compromised the gospel, Paul's faith in him, or his own process of leadership development.<sup>4</sup>

This one assignment is an example of how Paul demonstrates the importance of assisting promising leaders on a pathway that tests their mettle as leaders, in order that they emerge as 'workmen approved' – leaders of great character and conduct. In his letter to Timothy, Paul undergirds this experiential learning with key principles that ensured Timothy could rise to this challenge of becoming an approved workman.

## THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED... BECOMING APPROVED

In verses 15-22 of 2 TIMOTHY 2, Paul outlines four keys to becoming an '*approved workman*', a leader of character who will correctly handle God's word. These relate to hard work, single-minded focus, being honourable and someone who pursues

righteousness. Let's explore these statements further...

## AN UNASHAMED WORKMAN

The first key is to be a *'workman who does not need to be ashamed'* (2:15). The idea of taking pride in one's work and producing goods that are both high quality and long lasting, can sometimes be thought of as old fashioned, particularly in a competitive world where the pursuit of profit often trumps quality. The concept of built-in obsolescence in order to ensure future sales can leave consumers frustrated when we struggle to buy products that last much beyond their warranty period. But we probably also have items in our home that have lasted years and years and that we identify as having being made by a master craftsman. How much more should the Christian leader

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be a good workman with the gospel which has been entrusted to him? Just as a master craftsman handles his tools with great skill, having received on-the-job training in the workshop, so the mentor's task is to train his mentee to *'correctly handle the word of truth'*

so as to ensure the quality of the end product. An approved workman takes great pride in what they do, is not afraid of hard work, and is a person of integrity.

Timothy knew that Paul applied this lesson to himself. On a number of occasions Paul used his own approach to his work as an example for others to follow. One great example is how Paul reminded the Thessalonian church of how they lived and

worked among them *'while we preached the gospel of God to you... encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worth of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory'* (see **1 THESSALONIANS 2:6-12**). The challenge is not hard work for the sake of hard work, or hard work for personal gain. For hard work to be fruitful, it must be purposeful. The purpose Paul had for Timothy was that he should make every effort towards being a good steward of the gospel.<sup>5</sup>

Although our salvation is a divine exchange – our filthy rags for robes of righteousness – our growth in the knowledge of Christ is one of progressive transformation as his character is formed in us. And this happens within the context of our daily commitment to Christ demonstrated through our hard work in the cause of the gospel. In **ROMANS 12:1-2** Paul outlines that God has intended it this way.<sup>6</sup> There is perhaps no greater expression of what Paul is explaining to Timothy than that we are to offer our bodies as *'living sacrifices'*. This is ultimately an act of worship which demonstrates that we are not conforming to the world around us, but being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. The hard work Paul is calling Timothy to (and through him, all of us) is not about guaranteeing our salvation, but ensuring that we continue to explore the depth and breadth of the gospel as we both grow in our comprehension of its efficacy, while continuing to marvel at its divine mystery. The wonderful truth is that working for Christ brings about our own transformation, resulting in even greater Kingdom impact. As Paul stated in **ROMANS 12:2**, *'Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.'*

## SINGLE-MINDED FOCUS

Paul gives Timothy this very clear instruction, ‘Avoid godless chatter...’ On first reading, we may think that Paul is giving Timothy an instruction that leaders should avoid trivial conversations and gives the impression that Christian leaders should have a dour disposition and only talk about so-called ‘deep spiritual’ matters.

Yet the next couple of verses, containing the warning about Hymenaeus and Philetus, demonstrate that Paul is not simply warning against light-hearted conversation about sport or the weather. Rather, it is godless chatter that spirals from there into ungodly beliefs which becomes gangrenous and leads to destruction. It is the unhealthy interest in ‘controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction’ of which Paul spoke about in **1 TIMOTHY 6:3-5**. This issue is so important to Paul that he repeats and reaffirms it later in this chapter – even giving practical advice on how to handle it when people disagree with what is being taught from Scripture (**2 TIMOTHY 2:23-26**).

As we look back on 2000 years of church history, we can’t but wish that more Christian leaders had heeded Paul’s advice. Undoubtedly it would have resulted in fewer church splits, fewer controversies discrediting the faith, less apostasy and probably fewer wars! The antidote and second key to character development and avoiding this temptation is to stand firm, with single-minded devotion, on God’s solid foundation. It’s knowing the essence of the gospel and never departing from it, which Paul summarises in **VERSE 19** with two emphatic

statements. Firstly, being convinced of God's sovereignty, wisdom and omniscience, 'The Lord knows who are his', and secondly, true confession is proven by a full commitment to 'turn away from wickedness'. Paul therefore gives a formula to demolish arguments and contentions. He cuts to the quick and shows Timothy that having built a foundation on these simple truths will ensure he can maintain his single-minded devotion to Christ and not fall sway to godless chatter as others had done.

## CLEAN VESSELS

My parents were part of what I call 'Sunday-best' culture. Sundays were not only the 'Lord's Day' set aside to attend church, rest and reflect; Sunday was the day when we showed our best face to the world. It started with getting dressed into our 'Sunday-best' clothes – perfectly ironed and creaseless. Then I would watch my Dad polish our 'Sunday-best' shoes – the smell of shoe polish being something that evokes these memories to this day. The breakfast table was laid for us to enjoy with eggs boiled to perfection (soft yolk to dip toasted soldiers in) and the silver-plated stainless steel cutlery making its first appearance of the day. Between breakfast and departure for church, the roast dinner was put in the oven – timed to perfection so the meat and potatoes would be browning when we arrived home after church, ensuring mouth-watering smells would greet us as we opened the door. Then the 'Sunday-best' table was set – sanctified crockery which made a weekly appearance as the only worthy items upon which the lunchtime feast could be served. Afterwards, everything would be carefully washed and packed away in special 'untouchable' cupboards so as nothing would be accidentally abused during the following six

days. As a child I knew that, in our house, we had articles for noble purposes, and articles for everyday usage.

The problem is that many Christians, and even leaders, apply the 'Sunday-best' principle to their lifestyle as well. At certain times, be it church meetings on a Sunday or other special occasions, we bring our best face out of our 'sanctified' cupboard in order to demonstrate what we consider to be proper Christian behaviour. But it is a façade that cannot be maintained every day of the week.

Paul is challenging this dualistic lifestyle and charges Timothy to become a 'Sunday-best' Christian every day of the week, 24 hours a day. This is the third key to developing a godly character. It can sound so familiar that Christianity is not about

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religious duty and dogma, but about a lifestyle, that sometimes we actually forget it's true. The imagery Paul uses in 2 TIMOTHY 2:20-21 is the same as I've alluded to from my family's home. But his instruction is clear; to be effective in our service of God we need to 'cleanse'

ourselves from being polluted, second-rate, compromised and ultimately dishonourable instruments of service. Rather we are to strive to become instruments of honour, *'useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work'*.

The implication of the passage is clear. In the church, which is God's household, there are two sets of leaders emerging. There are those in the vein of Hymanaeus and Philetus who are examples of instruments who will bring dishonour upon the



church as leaders of ungodly character. And there are those in the vein of what Paul exhorts Timothy to become: instruments of honour. However, the latter do not emerge automatically. There is an exertion required on behalf of the emerging leader to work consistently towards becoming a servant of honour who's work and ministry will be worthy of the house of which God is Master and Lord.<sup>7</sup>

## PURSUE RIGHTEOUSNESS

The fourth key to becoming a leader of character is broken into two parts. Firstly, Paul instructs Timothy to '*flee the evil desires of youth...*' Some may take this as another indication that Timothy was struggling with the demands of leadership and was therefore vulnerable to temptation. If this is true, then every leader in every age can undoubtedly relate to Timothy. In the cauldron of spiritual leadership there is no greater tactic of the evil one than to make the '*desires of youth*' seem all the more appealing. No spiritual leader is immune from these desires and temptations, be they desires for fame and fortune, the vices of sexual immorality, or the temptations of pride, idolatry or self-sufficiency. These present a real and present danger for all of us. Paul himself demonstrated great self-awareness and vulnerability in his self-appraisal on behalf of all humankind contained in **ROMANS 7**. The destructive nature of the sinful human condition makes the things we know are not pleasing to God, and are most harmful to our spiritual condition, the very things that appear most appealing (**ROMANS 7:21-24**). As a spiritual physician giving a prescription to every leader throughout history, Paul has a simple remedy:

*Flee! Run away!*

As Lot was told to flee Sodom and Gomorrah and not look back, so we should sprint in the opposite direction whenever we find temptations luring us away from godliness. An approved workman sees no shame in fleeing from evil desires because he or she knows that accommodating those desires leads to disqualification from the race.

But the second component here is equally instructive. The running away is not aimless. It's not a case of 'run for the hills... anywhere will do'. With equal energy with which we are to run away from evil desires, we are to run towards righteousness... in active and hot pursuit of godliness.<sup>8</sup> But this should be no idle chase after a better way of living. It is a pursuit after the core truths of God's revelation in Christ, namely righteousness, faith, love and peace. This is the antithesis to youthful passions which are self-centred, self-absorbed, self-effacing and ultimately self-destructive. These gifts are the ultimate demonstration that the follower of Christ has submitted to his Lordship and is living as an approved workman. Paul consistently teaches that these fruits of the Spirit are the mark of discipleship and the evidence that Christ's character is being formed within His people:

*'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.  
But the greatest of these is love' (1 CORINTHIANS 13:13).*

*'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,  
kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and  
self-control. Against such things there is no law'  
(GALATIANS 5:22-24).*

*'We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints – the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world the gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth' (COLOSSIANS 1:3-6).*

In this section, Paul has set the standard to which he expects Timothy to aspire – that he should become an approved workman, able to correctly handle the word of truth. As a mentor, Paul understood that becoming an approved workman and a leader of character does not happen in a vacuum, but that important lessons are learned experientially, at the coalface. The keys Paul therefore gives to Timothy, and us, to becoming approved workmen are not theoretical truths to simply be meditated upon, but are practical aids to help every Christian leader as they desire to not 'wander from the truth' but build 'upon God's solid foundation'.

The four keys highlighted in this passage were to (1) be unashamed, (2) single-minded, (3) clean vessels who (4) flee from evil and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace. These are the hallmarks of a leader whose character is being moulded into the likeness of Christ.