

An Open Letter to Today's Young Leaders

This week, I'm hosting 16 guys in my home for a spiritual retreat. They are coming from nine states and one foreign country for three days of fellowship, teaching, prayer, hiking and Georgia barbecue. It will not be a one-way conversation. While I have some important advice to share, I'll be listening more than talking.

These guys represent the future leaders of the church. If you are in your 20s or 30s, so do you. I hope you will read this and pass it on to your friends.

Since my father passed away last year, I've been very aware of the brevity of life. I know my days are numbered. That's why I spend so much of my time mentoring the next generation, both men and women. I won't be around too much longer. So my job is to do whatever I can to help young leaders prepare for their own unique challenges.

This week when my young friends come to my house, we will spend all our study time in Paul's second epistle to Timothy. Some scholars call this letter "Paul's last will and testament" because he knew he would be stepping into eternity soon. He also knew Timothy would soon be hurled into the deep waters of spiritual responsibility even though he didn't feel ready for the challenge.

Paul was passing the baton to his beloved spiritual son. The apostle had done everything he could to prepare him, but now it was Timothy's time to shine. Paul gave Timothy five directives. I'm passing along these instructions to today's emerging leaders—because if you don't heed Paul's advice you will drop the ball.

If you are called to be a leader, take time to read 2 Timothy

this week and ask the Lord to prepare you for this adventure.

1. **Be bold.** Paul advised Timothy: “God has not given us a spirit of timidity” (1:7a, NASB). Leaders can’t be fearful. That doesn’t mean you won’t have weak knees or anxious thoughts when you step out of your comfort zone. It doesn’t mean you won’t feel butterflies before you speak publicly. But you must swallow hard and go forward anyway. Someone must go first. If you have surrendered to the call to leadership, you must bravely push your fears aside. God can change a wimp into a warrior.
2. **Be strong.** Paul told his spiritual son: “Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2:1b). Paul wrote those words from a filthy Roman prison. He probably had iron cuffs on his wrists, and maybe lice crawling on his body. Paul was toughened by hardship and suffering. Every leader must be tested by adversity. If you can’t take the stress and the anguish that spiritual leadership requires, don’t try it.

Today’s younger generation has been babied. Because of fatherlessness, helicopter parenting, the opioid crisis, video games and a myriad of toxic cultural pressures, many young adults are insecure, depressed, full of anxiety, confused about gender and sexuality, and afraid of responsibility. “Strong” almost sounds like a bad word today. But somebody must rise up and be strong to make a change. You have been chosen!

3. **Stay true to God’s Word.** Paul instructed Timothy: “Preach the word ... for the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine” (4:2-3a). Many leaders in the previous generation failed to preserve biblical morality. Many churches today are crumbling because we modified our theology to match popular culture instead of just preaching God’s timeless truths. (Please forgive my generation for thinking that we could vote to change

God's Word.)

How will churches grapple with issues such as sexual behavior, social justice, respect for life and the transgender movement over the next 30 years? Those topics are now in the hands of younger leaders. The ball is in your court. We need preachers of righteousness to resist today's onslaught of deception and apostasy.

4. **Make disciples.** Paul told Timothy: "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2:2). Notice Paul did not push Timothy to build big buildings or reach huge crowds. Paul stressed quality over quantity. He knew the best way to build a faithful church is to start with a few authentic disciples and then multiply them.

I tell the men and women I am mentoring: Please don't get addicted to the applause of a crowd. Big audiences will make you feel good about yourself, but they can also walk away from you without warning. God wants faithful followers who have the ability to reproduce more followers. Never measure your success by the number of people in seats.

5. **Stay on fire.** Paul also told his spiritual son: "Kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you by the laying on of my hands" (1:6b). What's the secret to spiritual passion? I have never met a devoted Christian who didn't spend lots of time alone with God. It was Moses' secret. It was David's secret. You must find the cleft of the rock. You must pray, read the Scriptures and pursue intimacy with the Holy Spirit if you want your spiritual fire to stay ablaze.

Paul was saying, "Stay lit!" You cannot lead God's people if your embers are cold. This is the problem with so much of today's church—we have "professional" leaders who aren't filled with the Holy Spirit. They rely on intellect, gimmicks,

church growth strategies and human ability rather than trusting God's power. That might last a few years, but nothing will last if the branches are not continually connected to the vine.

As a father in the Lord, I am urging you: Be bold, be strong, stay true to God's Word, make disciples and stay on fire. Soon you will be handing the baton to another generation. Please be faithful with what Jesus has charged you to do!