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I Timothy 4:7-14
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I CHALLENGE YOU

"Keep yourself in training for the practice
of religion."

-I Timothy 4:7

Some time ago a motorist, picked up unconscious after an accident, opened his eyes just as he was being carried into a neighboring gas station. Immediately he began to struggle and tried desperately to get away from his would be helpers. When they finally calmed him down, someone asked him why he put up such a struggle. He replied, "Well, the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was a big red Shell station sign,--- and some guy was standing in front of the letter S."

No one, unless it be a judge, knows better than a minister the kind of hell in which some people spend their lives. It is not a pretty thing to behold, and not long ago a teacher became aware of it. He resigned his post in a suburban high school and paid \$140 of his own money to put an advertisement in a local newspaper in which he told the community something of his opinion about the students he had been teaching. He accused them of being "self-centered, frivolous, and leading a slick, empty life." He said they had "become bored with themselves, with others and with life," and concluded, "The petrification of a once vital, young person is a sight so ugly that all my senses reel from it."

Whatever the facts of his case may be, and whether or not he is justified in giving up on these young people, the fact does remain that he is describing a phenomenon all too prevalent in our modern society.

To illustrate, let me cite a story from a Canadian newspaper. It reported the suicide of a young person who left a note saying, "I am 21. I have seen everything worth seeing. I know everything worth knowing. I don't like life - - it's cheap, dirty, disappointing. I've had all I want."

That same newspaper, however, reported a second story covering a banquet for the late Sir William Mulock. Sir William was being honored on his 95th birthday for a remarkable career of public service. In response to this recognition he said, "I am still at work with my hand to the plow and my face to the future. The shadows of evening lengthen about me, but morning is in my heart. The testimony I bear is this: that the castle of enchantment is not yet behind me. It is before me still and daily I catch glimpses of its battlements and towers. The best of life is always further on, its real lure is hidden from our eyes, somewhere behind the hills of time."

Which one of these two lives would you like to emulate? Life is indeed a battle, a struggle, a challenge. A certain father I heard of recently indicated the challenge when he was approached by a friend who asked: "I see your daughter is getting married soon. Do you think she is prepared for the battle of life?" "Well," replied the father, "She ought to be, she has been in four engagements already." Yes, life is indeed a battle and each one of us would do well to learn the strategy of victory.

St. Paul once wrote a letter to a young Christian named Timothy and gave to Timothy these words of advice which are our text this morning. They give us the Christian's strategy:

"Keep yourself in training for the practice of religion."

Now, it is very easy for young people who have been through the Confirmation Class experience to assume that having passed this particular milestone, they are now full fledged Christians, well trained in the spiritual life, and all they have to do from here on is coast. But they could not be further from the truth if this is their attitude. St. Paul knew that. If one wants to be prepared for the battle of life, and for the various engagements that lie inevitably along the way, one must keep himself in training constantly, day by day, and I would like to challenge each of you this morning to keep yourself in the kind of training that will strengthen your religious life so that when the difficulties of the future confront you, and confront you they will, you will be prepared.

II

Now, how do we follow Paul's advice to Timothy to keep ourselves in training for the practice of religion? Well, the first thing you must do is to continue in the fellowship of the Christian church. You must go to church regularly. I have had enough experience to know that those young people who drop out of regular attendance following Confirmation, usually stop growing in the religious life because they have given up that important discipline which could constantly remind them of their religious responsibilities and duties.

I always remind young couples who come to me to be married that this is the most important aspect of married life. I tell them that without the religious virtues of faith, patience, understanding and forgiveness, no marriage can be successful. Without these virtues, no life can be successful. Then I go on to tell these young couples that because we are human, we constantly need to be reminded of the importance of these virtues. We need them called to our attention, and going to church on Sunday is the thing that does it. Once we give up the fellowship of the church, there is a very good likelihood that we will give up the practice of these virtues. At that point our lives may very well begin to fall apart and lose their meaning and motivation.

I know that among certain groups of young people it is not fashionable, not the thing to do, to go to church on Sunday. Well, what is it that is going to motivate your life? What everyone else is doing? That which is smart and fashionable? Or are you going to be motivated by what you know is right and good? I challenge you to be your own master, to run your own life, to do what you know is right, and what it is that will help you to be the kind of person God wants you to be.

On the final examination this year I asked each of you to answer the question, "Do you really want to join this church?" One of the boys, in the course of his answer, put in these simple, ordinary words that some might call trite, but which I believe are profound. He said, "You can't go wrong believing in God." There are lots of ways of going wrong, and lots of people who find them, but you can't go wrong believing in God; and the fellowship of the church is the thing which best sustains your belief in God.

III

Secondly, I challenge you to live by the highest and best principles you know. I know what some of your temptations are going to be. Someone is going to come along one day and say, "Come with us while we do so and so." You may object a little but someone will then say, "Well, you won't know what it's like if you don't try it." Are you going to be tempted by that philosophy? May I suggest that you won't know what suicide is like until you try it. You won't know what it is like to run off the road

at 90 miles an hour until you try it. You won't know what it is like to flunk out of college until you try it. You won't know what it is like to have your family fall apart because of alcoholism until you try it. You won't know what it is like to be a dope addict until you try it. But if you live by that idiotic philosophy, what you are doing is rejecting all of the experience of the human race. All you need to do is to study what has happened to other people when they tried it, and you will know without trying it yourself that these are the ways that lead to death.

There are some young people who say, "I won't know what it is like unless I start smoking in high school." I'd like to take them into a hospital and show them what it's like to die of lung cancer. Some high school young people say, "I won't know what it's like to drink unless I start drinking in high school." I could tell them the true life adventure of one family who lived by that philosophy. The father became an alcoholic and died in a tuberculosis sanitarium. The mother became an alcoholic and was found frozen to death in an alley one morning. A son was sent to San Quentin prison. The youngest daughter had a life full of tragedy, including divorce, and an arrest for shop-lifting. Another daughter became an unwed mother.

That is often what happens when one tries it to see what it's like. If we refuse to learn from the experience of others, then we shall have to go through the hell of these experiences for ourselves. The world doesn't owe you anything, but you owe the world the responsibility of always being your best self. God has a will and a purpose for your life. Your job is to find out what it is and accomplish it. You can do that only as you continually live by the highest and best that you know.

IV

Finally, may I challenge you to make Jesus Christ your model and your hero, and strive ever to become what he was. Build into your life the kind of qualities he built into his and you will never go very far wrong. Seek to live the life of love, and understanding, and forgiveness that he led and you will find a life of joy and fullness which you can never find in any other way. Study the Gospels. Come to know this man. Try to be like him. If you want a challenge for your life, there is none greater than this.

Now, may I just conclude by saying that you must begin to live this kind of life today. You can't wait until tomorrow. I know how you young people feel, that there is a whole eternity before you, and there is always time tomorrow to do all of these things that ought to be done. But you are wrong. Ask any of the persons 60, 70 years of age who are in this congregation this morning, and they will tell you how very short life is. You must begin now, or it may well be too late. You will never be able to do tomorrow what you have not prepared yourself to do today. We don't have an eternity. We have only a very short lifetime in which to do all of those things which can fit us for eternity.

"I have only just a minute: Only sixty seconds in it.
Forced upon me -- can't refuse it, didn't seek it, didn't choose it,
But it's up to me to use it. I must suffer if I lose it --
Give account if I abuse it. Just a tiny little minute --
But eternity is in it."

God has given you a life to live in this moment of time. I challenge you to use it well.