

SERVING GOD IN YOUR YOUTH

1 Timothy 4:12

by Andy Manning

Our society is confused about youth. On the one hand, we place a high value on children. Kids and youth are priceless. They must be loved, and cared for, and protected, and given every opportunity to succeed in life. On the other hand, many don't respect kids. Kids are seen as the future, and therefore, we don't treat them with much respect in the present. That is, we view childhood as a season of preparation for the future, but we don't respect kids for the contribution that they can make in the present. We don't expect them to add much value to society today. Their time will come, but that time is not the present.

And that mindset has crept its way into the church. Kids are typically seen as the church of tomorrow. "You are the future!" we say. The church loves kids, but we don't expect them to add much value to the church today. They are in prep mode. We don't expect them to make a big impact right now. They're "just kids."

And so our society is confused about kids and youth. We value them, but we don't respect them. We place a high value on them because they are the future; but we don't respect them as able to make a valuable impact for God today.

But the Bible has a different viewpoint on youth. And if we will learn to look at youth through the lens of this verse, then everyone will benefit – kids, the church, and society at large. Let's take a look 1 Timothy 4:12.

Don't let anyone think less of you because you are young. Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity.

1 Timothy is a letter written by the apostle Paul to a young pastor named Timothy. Timothy was the pastor of the church in the city of Ephesus (modern day Turkey) at this point, and Paul wrote this letter as an instruction manual so Timothy would know how to lead the church.

And Timothy was a young pastor. Scholars aren't exactly sure about his age, but the Greek word for young (*neotes*) could refer to anyone up to the age of 40. Scholars estimate that he was in his thirties. You might say, "That's not very young." Well, Timothy must have been much younger than many of the people in the church, and that makes him young. If you talk to someone in their 50's or 60's, they might tell you that it is tempting to assume that a person in their thirties is still very young, and green, and wet behind the ears, and still has a lot to learn.

So Timothy is young, and Paul had three things to say to Timothy. First, you should serve God in your youth. Second, your youth can be an obstacle to serving God. And third, you can

overcome the obstacle of youth by being an example for others to follow. Let's take a look at each of these.

1. You should serve God in your youth.

Paul knew that Timothy's age would cause people in the church to doubt his ability to lead. "He's too young; he doesn't know anything." And perhaps even Timothy struggled with self-doubt. Maybe Timothy asked Paul at one point, "Are you sure I'm old enough to be in charge of this church?" But Paul's whole point in 1 Timothy 4:12 is that even though you are young, and even though some people might look down on you because of your age, don't let that stop you from serving God. You should serve God in your youth.

And that's what I want to say to the children and youth in our church. You should serve God in your youth. You should serve God today. Don't wait until sometime in the future. Don't wait for adulthood. Don't wait until you become a teenager, or until you graduate high school. Serve God today. Right now. Start today.

How old do you have to be to start serving God? What does the Bible say? Does the Bible give an age-limit? "You have to be this tall to ride this roller coaster, and you have to be this old to start serving God." Of course not! That's ridiculous. In fact, the Bible has some exciting stories of young heroes who didn't wait until they were all grown up to serve God. Let me give you some examples.

Joseph – Joseph's older brothers hated him, so they sold him into slavery. He was probably just a teenager. Soon he was serving a man named Potiphar. When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him into having sex with her, he resisted. Even though most people would have felt betrayed and abandoned by God and would have lost faith. Joseph continued to trust and obey God, even when life was hard, and God was allowing bad things to happen to him.

David – David was only a teenager when he volunteered for a one-on-one match with the Philistine giant Goliath. Every other man in Israel, including King Saul, was afraid of Goliath. When David volunteered Saul said, "Don't be ridiculous! There's no way you can fight this Philistine and possibly win! You're only a boy, and he's been a man of war since his youth (1 Samuel 17:33)." But David insisted, and he beat the giant with only one stone.

Josiah – Josiah became the king of Judah at age 8. The interesting thing about Josiah was that he did not come from a godly family. His father and grandfather were evil men who did not love God. But 2 Kings 22:2 says of Josiah, "He did what was pleasing in the Lord's sight and followed the example of his ancestor David. He did not turn away from doing what was right." Josiah's father and grandfather had led the nation to turn away from God, but Josiah turned it

all around. He got rid of all the idolatry in the land and led the nation of Judah back to God and God's word.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – When they were just kids, they were taken from their parents and brought to a different country – Babylon – to serve the king, Nebuchadnezzar. On one occasion, King Nebuchadnezzar decided to build a gold statue of himself – 90 feet tall by 90 feet wide – and ordered that everyone had to bow down and worship the statue when they heard the music play. If anyone refused, they would be thrown into the blazing, fiery furnace. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused. This angered the king, and he gave them one last chance. But they stayed faithful to God. They were thrown into the fiery furnace, but it didn't hurt them. The king took them out of the furnace, promoted them, and then made it against the law for anyone to speak against the God of Israel.

Mary – Mary was only 14 or 15 years old when the angel Gabriel told her that she would be the mother of the Savior. This was a miracle, because she was still a virgin. And that had to have been scary, because if anyone suspected her of impurity, she might be stoned, or her parents might kick her out of the house, or her fiancé might abandon her. But Mary responded to the angel, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true (Luke 1:38)." These are examples of young people who didn't wait until they were all grown up to serve God. They weren't the future. They were the present. They made a huge impact in the world in their youth.

Here's the problem with waiting for the future to serve God: The future may never come. You may die or Jesus might come back before you grow up. We must serve God today, because today is all that is guaranteed.

How can a kid serve God? First of all, you can help your mom and dad when they volunteer in church. We have a lot of kids who serve with their parents in CA Kids, and we have kids who come early and stay after church to help their parents set up and pick up all the equipment. Second, you can tell your friends about Jesus and invite them to church. This past December my three oldest daughters walked across the street and invited their friend Caitlyn, a sixth grader, to come to our house for our Christmas service. And she came, and she had the opportunity to hear the gospel. Third, you can pray. That's a big way to serve God. You can pray for our church to be healthy and effective at reaching people for Christ. You can pray for your parents to have a healthy marriage and to be effective at raising you. You can pray for our country to move in a godly direction. And finally, simply find a need and meet it. Look around at your neighborhood, at church, at our country, at our world, find something broken that God cares about, and try to fix it. Find something that's not right, and try to help make it right. Find somebody that's in need, and help them. Find someone who is hurting, and try to comfort

them. Find someone who is lost, and try to help them come to know Christ. If you simply ask God to use you, however He wants, He will. But you have to decide that you are going to start serving God today, not tomorrow; in the present, not in the future; in your youth, not when you're all grown up.

2. Your youth can be an obstacle.

The second thing that Paul was saying to Timothy was that your youth can be an obstacle. Your young age can get in the way of serving God. How so? Because you are young, people will think less of you. The ESV says people will "despise you" because you are young. Because you are young, people won't respect you. They will ignore you. They will disregard you. They will overlook you. They will assume that you don't have much to add; that you don't have much to contribute. They will assume that you don't know very much; that you can't accomplish very much. Because of your youth, people will be reluctant to listen to what you have to say; to follow you; and even to ask you for help.

But the truth is that you can make a difference. You can make an impact. You can make a contribution. You can serve God. And you should. God wants you to. He is calling you to serve Him right now. So there are two things we need to keep in mind. One is for the kids, and one is for the adults.

Kids, don't let the adults discourage you from serving God. People tend to rise to the expectations that others place on them. So if the adults around you don't think you can make much of a difference for God, if they don't think you have much to offer at church, then it will be very tempting to believe that. If they treat you like the church of the future, it will be tempting to believe that you need to wait until the future to serve God. But don't let anyone discourage you from serving God. You keep volunteering. You keep offering to help. You keep looking for ways to contribute. You keep asking God to use you right now. People may look down on you, just like Saul and Goliath looked down on David, but with God's help you can do great things. You might be small; you might be weak; you might not have that much knowledge or experience yet; but if you will ask God to use you, and if you'll tell God that you will do anything He wants you to do, He will use you.

Adults, don't underestimate kids. Don't leave kids out. This is one of the main advantages of being a family-integrated church. Because we are family-integrated, we are also inter-generational. And it helps that we're a small church. In our church, all the generations are mixed in together. In age-segregated churches, the adults send the kids and the youth away. What does that communicate? "You're not really a part of the real church yet; you're the church in training; you're the church of the future." But if you treat kids like they are the church of the future, then they won't live for God today. And that's what we want to see at Church Acadiana. We want to include kids in all that we do. They have much to contribute.

God can use them to bless us and help us and even lead us. But we can't overlook them. We need to not only allow the kids to help out, but we need to intentionally look for ways to get our kids involved in serving God and helping out at church. Look for ways to include them. I encourage you again to find a place to volunteer and get your kids involved with you. Teach them that they are serving God and making a difference for Him. Don't ever serve God alone. Get your kids involved with you.

3. You can overcome the obstacle of youth by being an example for others to follow.

It might be accurate to say that the way that a young person can make the biggest impact for God is to set an example of a fully-devoted Christian life. **When you set an example, three things happen. First of all, you will earn the respect of others.** When people see your Christian maturity, they will be more willing to listen to you, to include you, and to even follow you. **Second, you will teach others.** The Greek word for example is *typos*, and it means a pattern or a model. When you live a mature Christian life, you are giving people a model or a pattern that they can follow. You are teaching them how to live for Christ, not by your words, but simply by your actions. Your life is a sermon. **And third, you will be an inspiration to others.** You will encourage and motivate others. Other kids will see you and think, "If that kid can be a mature Christian, then I can, too!" And adults will see you and think, "If that kid can be a mature Christian, then I have no excuse. I need to get busy serving and growing in the Lord." So when you set the example, you earn respect, you teach people how to follow Christ, and you inspire people to follow Christ. That's why you could say that the first and most important way that any of us could serve the Lord is by setting an example for others to follow. Timothy was a pastor, a preacher, but Paul's message to Timothy was, "Timothy, if you want to be an effective pastor, the most important thing you can do is to set a good example. That's more important than anything else."

And then Paul gives Timothy 5 areas to focus on: Speech, life, love, faith, and purity. These are **5 areas that we need to set the example** for others to follow. Let's take a look at each one.

Speech: Talk in a way that honors God. How do you talk in a way that honors God? We can find the four ways to honor God with our speech in Ephesians 4:25-29. "25 So stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbors the truth, for we are all parts of the same body." **First, only use words that are true.** Never tell a lie. Always be truthful, because God is truthful. Look at verses 26-27. "26 And don't sin by letting anger control you. Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 for anger gives a foothold to the devil." **Second, only use words that are gentle.** Do you know what gentleness means? Remain calm and kind, even when you are angry. The good thing about God is that when He gets angry He never loses His temper. He never loses control. And that's how we need to talk. Remain calm and kind, even when you are angry. Don't shout. Don't use harsh words. Don't scream. Don't yell. Don't use mean words. Go on to verses 28-29. "28 If you are a thief, quit stealing. Instead, use your hands for good hard work, and then

give generously to others in need. 29 Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them."

The third thing is to only use words that are pure. No cursing. No dirty words. No nasty words. No dirty jokes. **And the fourth thing is only use words that are loving.** Don't hurt people with your words. Don't talk about them behind their back. Don't criticize people or cut them down. Use your words to encourage people, and to comfort people, and to give good advice, to teach them, to build them up.

Life: Imitate Christ with your actions. The second way to set the example is your life, or conduct. Imitate Christ with your actions. That's what a Christian is supposed to do; act like Christ. 1 John 2:6 says, "Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did." How do you do that? Three ways. **First, read your Bible every day so that you can learn what Christ is like.** You can't act like Christ if you don't know what He is like. The best place to learn is the New Testament. When I was a kid I started reading the New Testament, one chapter every night before bed. And that's how I learned how to act like Christ. So first read your Bible. **Second, obey God's word.** When you read in the Bible that God says to do something or stop doing something, obey it right away. Jesus was perfectly obedient to God. He never sinned. So if you will focus on obeying God's word, you will become more and more like Jesus. **And third, WWJD.** All day long, in every situation, ask yourself, "What would Jesus do?" And then do it.

Love: Do everything with love. The third way to set an example for others is to do everything with love. Being a Christian is all about love. Jesus said the greatest commandment is love: Love God and love others (Matthew 22:37-40). Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14:1, "Let love be your highest goal." And in 1 Corinthians 16:14 he said, "And do everything with love." If you want to serve God in your youth, then do everything with love. Make your life all about love. How do you do that? The word in the Bible for love is *agape*. We can learn all about *agape* love from the way that God loved us. Look at John 3:16. "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." How did God love? He gave – He gave His Son. He sacrificed – Jesus suffered on the cross for our sins. He served – He died on the cross not for His benefit, but for ours. And He loved us unconditionally – He didn't die for us because we deserved it; He died for us because He loves us. **So love means four things.** First, love gives – be a giver; of your time, your money, your ear, your talents for other people. Second, love sacrifices – sacrifice your time, money, comfort, pleasure for others. Third, love serves – always look for ways to help others; be helpful. And fourth, love is unconditional – don't just love people who love you back; love even your enemies. Don't just love people who deserve it; love people who are mean to you. Don't just love attractive people, but ugly people; not just people you like, but people you don't like.

Faith: Have unwavering confidence in God. Remember that faith is confidence in God, that He is who He says He is and will do what he says He will do. You need to have unwavering faith;

unwavering confidence in God. The best and perhaps the only way to set an example of unwavering faith is in the face of trials. Trials are faith tests. When the storms of life hit, you don't doubt God; you don't get angry with God; you don't run to sinful pleasures to comfort yourself; you don't freak out in worry; you don't lose your joy and peace in the Lord. Instead, when the storms of life hit, you keep the faith. You continue to trust that God loves you, God is with you, God is in control, and God is going to use all of this for your good. And you continue to praise God and serve Him and rejoice in Him. The church needs good examples of unwavering faith in the storms of life.

Purity: Strive for total sexual purity. The fifth and last area that you need to set the example is in the area of sexual purity. Paul uses the same word for purity, *hagneia*, in 1 Timothy 5:2. "Treat older women as you would your mother, and treat younger women with all purity as you would your own sisters." God's will for our sexuality is to keep all sexual activity in marriage – visual, mental, emotional, and physical. This applies to single people and married people. And it's getting more and more rare in our society to find single or married people who are striving for total sexual purity. We need good examples. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 says, "God's will is for you to be holy, so stay away from all sexual sin. 4 Then each of you will control his own body and live in holiness and honor— 5 not in lustful passion like the pagans who do not know God and his ways."

How do you strive for total sexual purity? On a practical level the most important thing you can do is to make a firm decision to save dating for when you are ready to get married. In my family we don't allow our kids to have boyfriends and girlfriends. We are teaching them to save dating for when they are old enough to look for a spouse and get married. Why? Because in a dating relationship you get romantically attached, and romance leads to sexual temptation. When you get emotionally attached, your body wants to follow. The physical wants to follow the emotional. And when you are young, it is very difficult to resist those temptations. So if you will guard your heart and save dating for when you are ready to look for a spouse and get married, then you will guard your body from intense sexual temptation.

So, God wants you to serve Him in your youth. Don't wait for adulthood. Don't wait until after you graduate high school. Begin right away. And the best way to start serving God is by setting an example for others to follow. Be an exemplary Christian. Set an example of a fully-devoted Christian, and God will use you in a mighty way.