

Discipling Younger Men

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Introduction

This purpose of this workshop is to encourage us as men to reach out and disciple younger men.

As to what I mean by “discipling younger men,” I hope to encourage us in ministering to young men in the church who are noticeably younger in age (i.e., probably younger than 18 years old) and have not yet reached the point where they can confidently make disciples on their own. But we won’t stop there—I hope to encourage us to disciple these young men further as they grow into being Christian men who in turn disciple others just the same.

While many are familiar with the Pastoral Epistles and have some idea of the relationship between Timothy and Paul, I never tire of looking at how the older Paul disciplined the younger Timothy. Their discipleship relationship makes for a prime example for our study.

After getting a rough idea of the ages of Paul and Timothy, we will attempt to do a chronological walk through their relationship, looking more through the eyes of Timothy than Paul, and gather principles for discipling younger men along the way.¹ I will end by illustrating these principles further from a Timothy/Paul relationship I have had in my own life.

The Ages of Paul and Timothy

Paul called himself “an old man” (*presbytēs*)² in the ninth verse of Philemon, a letter written in AD 60, indicating that he was 60 years old or older at the time.³ About 30 years earlier, he was probably 30 years old when Luke described him as “a young man” (*neanias*), a term that could range from 20 to 40 years old.⁴ He was converted at this time (Acts 9:1–19a) and then spent roughly two decades in missionary ministry before Timothy joined him in Acts 16:1–5.

When we first see Timothy in Acts 16:1–5, Paul is traveling through Lystra during his second missionary journey in AD 50–52 (Acts 15:40–18:22). Paul is about 50 years old, and Timothy’s age is not described. We do find, however, in 1 Timothy, written about AD 65, that Paul told Timothy to let no man despise his “youth” (1 Tim 4:12; *neotēs*), a word indicating Timothy was probably around 30 to 35 years old.⁵ Timothy would therefore have been born around AD 30 and been about 20 years old when he joined Paul in Acts 16.

¹ The dating scheme that follows is approximate and not precise and comes from my accumulated study of the life of Paul and various books of the Bible. Exact precision is not necessary for our study, though we do at least want to have a good idea of the ages of Timothy and Paul at the outset (see below). Perhaps the resources I have leaned on most are the following: William W. Combs, “Life & Ministry of Paul: Class Notes” (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007); D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005); and Robert E. Picirilli, *Paul the Apostle* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986 and 2017).

² All Scripture quotations are from the ESV.

³ Picirilli, *Paul the Apostle* (2017), 18–19.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (WBC 46; Dallas, TX: Word, 2000), 258–59, explores the meaning of *neotēs* in biblical and extrabiblical literature, showing it can be used to describe either young children or even someone into their thirties or forties. He puts Timothy “in his late twenties to mid thirties” when he received 1 Timothy in AD 62.

Digging further, there seems to be enough Scriptural support to say that Timothy at least knew who Paul was by the time they met in Acts 16. Paul had previously made disciples in Lystra towards the end of his first missionary journey in AD 47–49 (Acts 14:7–23; cf. 13:1–14:28), which probably included Timothy’s grandmother Lois and mother Eunice. They had been teaching Timothy the Scriptures since childhood and most likely believed the gospel when the apostle Paul came through their city, preaching that Jesus was the Son of God (cf. 2 Tim 1:5; 3:15).⁶ While there may not have been much of a personal relationship between Paul and Timothy yet (if any at all), it is quite possible that Timothy was in his mid to late teens when he first heard about Paul. After all, the apostle’s reputation would have included being stoned and left for dead after preaching in Timothy’s city (Acts 14:19–20).

Having explored the ages of Paul and Timothy, Paul was probably about 30 years older than Timothy. Paul was somewhere in his late forties when he first came to Lystra, and Timothy was in his mid to late teens. When Paul recruited Timothy in Acts 16, Paul was about 50, and Timothy was about 20. As we will see, this age difference made for a natural father/son discipleship relationship that would last until Paul went to receive his crown. Perhaps this relationship meant all the more to Timothy since his own father was not a believer (Acts 16:1).

With the relationship of Paul and Timothy in mind, let’s walk through their lives as Scripture records them and see several principles for discipling younger men.

1. Be the kind of man that younger men would want to follow.

As mentioned above, Acts 14:7–23 is part of Paul’s first missionary trip (Acts 13:1–14:28), which took place approximately AD 47–49. Timothy was in his mid- to late-teens when Paul first came to Lystra. While there, Paul was stoned and left for dead. He got up and returned to the city and kept on preaching to a handful of cities until he returned to Antioch to report on his ministry (Acts 14:7–28; cf. 13:1–3).

Timothy likely knew who Paul was from Paul’s first time to Lystra. Whether directly or indirectly, he gave him and his family the gospel and almost died for doing so. Imagine the impact that Paul’s testimony would have had upon Timothy. We should strive to be as steadfast as Paul in our own faith so that younger men would want to follow us.

2. Minister to the whole family.

Paul knew Timothy’s grandmother and mother by their names, their faith, and their training of Timothy (2 Tim 1:5; 3:15). Since they were already holding fast to the OT that they had, it is no surprise to see that they gladly believed in its fulfillment in Jesus when Paul came to preach the gospel.

Paul’s ministry to the whole family made it an easy “yes” to answer when he would ask for Timothy to accompany him later. He needed no references, and he was not interested in only those who could help him. As he ministered to all, the opportunity to disciple Timothy came his way. Seek to minister to the whole family, and the Lord just might give you unique opportunities to disciple younger men.

⁶ Paul said in 2 Tim 3:15 that he had been schooled in the sacred writings since “childhood” (2 Tim 3:15; *brepheos*), a word that has the idea of *infancy*. In every other NT instance always refers to a “baby” or an “infant” (Luke 1:41, 44; 2:12, 16; 18:15; Acts 7:19; 1 Pet 2:2), whether still in or just out of the womb.

3. Be faithful over time to increase your opportunities for discipling younger men.

A teen in Acts 14:7–23, we now find Timothy about 20 years old in Acts 16:1–2 at the beginning of Paul’s second missionary journey (Acts 15:40–18:22; AD 50–52). Timothy had acquired a commendable testimony among the Christians in multiple locations. Lystra and Iconium were about 18 miles apart.

Paul returned to Lystra in Acts 16:1–2 to strengthen the church that he had planted (cf. Acts 15:41). His faithfulness over time yielded an opportunity to see that some of the disciples had matured, and for Timothy in particular, to the point of being responsible enough to join his missionary endeavors.

As God blesses your ministry in maturing the church, it may snowball into something greater than you anticipated. As families grow together, your ministry to them will have an impact in the home, potentially providing a number of younger men to disciple in time.

4. Intentionally disciple young men who will respond to your discipleship.

Paul wanted a third missionary to join him and Barnabas for his second missionary journey, which created a sharp disagreement over taking John Mark who had deserted them earlier (Acts 13:5, 13; cf. 12:12). Barnabas thus took John Mark to Cyprus, and Paul took Silas to visit the churches from his first missionary journey (Acts 15:37–41). While John Mark had lost some points with Paul, he would return to faithfulness and recover his testimony over time (2 Tim 4:11). Not every disappointment is a permanent disappointment. For the time being, however, Paul wanted a coworker that he could trust.

The well-recommended Timothy would be that coworker in Acts 16:1–5. It was probably at this time that Paul and others laid their hands on Timothy in ordaining him for gospel ministry (cf. 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6). Paul’s references to Timothy as his son and child in the faith imply a father/son relationship in which Timothy obviously desired to follow Paul (1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; 1 Cor 4:17; Phil 2:22).

Sometimes you get a John Mark, and sometimes you get a Timothy. It’s hard to know exactly how a young man will develop in time, but we should disciple when the desire to be discipled is there.

5. Involve younger men in your ministry.

Paul did not merely tell Timothy what to do and what he needed to know. He actively involved him in ministry as they visited and strengthened the churches (Acts 16:3–5). This meant opportunities to preach and speak (e.g., 2 Cor 1:19).

Not every young man is gifted to speak, but every young man is gifted to serve in some way (1 Pet 4:10–11). Whether the ministry to others is a formal program in the church or not, be creative in involving younger men in your ministries.

6. Show younger men Christian love.

“My true child” (1 Tim 1:2), “my beloved child” (2 Tim 1:2), “I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy” (2 Tim 1:4)—these were not mere formalities. Paul loved Timothy deeply and let him know it. Timothy’s tears tell us that he deeply loved Paul as well (2 Tim 1:4). Though these references come from Paul’s later letters, this affection likely began at the beginning of their relationship.

Discipleship is not a rigid, scheduled thing to be communicated as a master to his pupil. The bond of Christ is a bond of love, and to pass the doctrine and practice of the faith to a younger man should naturally create a deep and lasting relationship. If you don’t communicate your Christian affection for those who are longing for it, they will gladly run to those who do.

7. Once a younger man is responsible enough, give him tasks of his own.

After being expelled from Thessalonica, Paul sent Timothy to minister in his stead (1 Thess 3:2, 6 with Acts 17:14–15; 18:5). Paul sent Timothy to Corinth, knowing that they would be disappointed not to have Paul himself (1 Cor 16:8–11). Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus to minister to a situation that involved false teachers and maybe even the discipline of elders (1 Tim 1:3–4; 5:19–20).

Sometimes we want everything to be done our own way, and so we do it ourselves. Not only does this mindset keep opportunities away from eager, young men who want to minister, but it also keeps people from receiving the ministry from these younger men. It may even quench their desire to serve, and when the time comes to hand a ministry over, the young men will have no desire to take the reins or may have left for other fields to labor. There may be some risk involved, but if carefully done, delegating and giving ministry to young men will multiply the work of Christ, giving God all the greater glory.

8. If necessary, encourage others to let the younger men serve.

Paul gave a firm word to Corinth to accept Timothy in his absence (1 Cor 16:10–11). His youth and simply not being Paul (who they really wanted to come) may have otherwise provoked his rejection.

While we do not want to be “lawnmower parents” to our spiritual children by removing every obstacle in their way, there are times where it may be helpful to step in and create opportunities for ministry through a word of recommendation. A sure word from an older Christian opens a door to ministry better than the word of the young man himself, which carries the risk of appearing self-serving.

9. Teach younger men the Word of God, encourage them to uphold it, and warn them of what happens should they fail.

Paul bookended 1 Timothy with admonitions to Timothy to uphold the word of God, complete with warnings of those who had not done so and had rejected the faith (1 Tim 1:18–20; 6:20–21).

We might expect Paul to tell anyone these things and especially Timothy. But more than that, the references above include the use of Timothy’s name after Paul’s initial greeting (cf. 1 Tim 1:2). Paul made an emphatic personal point by calling Timothy out by name to heed his admonitions.

Don’t assume that conviction comes by osmosis. Sometimes a powerful, penetrating, and heartfelt admonition from an older, loving Christian man to a younger, teachable man will make an indelible mark on his soul. It may be that this admonition will be the very means God uses in encouraging the young man to persevere when he finds it difficult to serve.

10. Remember, younger men will disciple younger men just as you disciplined them.

Paul selflessly served the church, and Timothy ended up loving people just like Paul did (Phil 2:19–22). He shared Paul’s resolve, being willing to serve even if it meant going to prison (Heb 13:23; cf. 2 Tim 1:8).

If you do not disciple young men, they will not disciple young men, leaving every man unable to disciple anyone else—the exact opposite of how to obey 2 Tim 2:2. But, if you disciple young men well, Lord willing, they will disciple just the same.

A Personal Testimony

I intentionally wrote this section of notes last because I did not want to view the above study of Scripture through the eyes of my own experience. After compiling the above, I thought I’d look at my own life to see if these principles were true for me. I can say they were, and I hope the Lord uses me to repeat for others what I experienced as a Timothy with my own Paul.

- 1. Be the kind of man that younger men would want to follow.** As a teenager, I remember listening to a pastor preach with passion at a camp where I was working as operational staff. He said what he meant, and meant what he said. I was always happy to follow that kind of preaching. I was actually away from the Lord at the time, but little did I know how the Lord would use his preaching in relation to future decisions I would have to make.
- 2. Minister to the whole family.** Though we lived in another state, my father knew who this pastor was, and when given the opportunity as a Bible major in college to intern at his church one summer and then again for a long-term internship during seminary, my father heartily recommended me to go there. All I knew of his church at the time was that their preacher preached well and that they had two big blue and white buses that they sent every summer to the camp that I previously mentioned. When I had to figure out a church for an internship, I called his church thanks to a list of churches in my college’s ministerial office because it was the only church on the list that I knew anything about. My dad knew more, and my heavenly Father was directing it all.
- 3. Be faithful over time to increase your opportunities for discipling younger men.** As this pastor was faithful in his ministry over time, the Lord unexpectedly opened the door for me to be under his leadership. His church and ministry had grown, making increased internship opportunities available to guys like me.
- 4. Intentionally disciple young men who will respond to your discipleship.** Being a summer intern was one thing for a church to handle, but not everyone gets hired as long-term staff. When the opportunity arose for me to come back again while attending seminary, the pastor and the church kindly took me back, knowing my desire to be there and learn from him and the other pastors.
- 5. Involve younger men in your ministry.** While I did not have the maturity to handle counseling and church issues myself, my pastor regularly took time to answer my many questions about some of the things he was facing and how he resolved situations. He involved me as much as my maturity allowed, which helps me as a pastor to this day.
- 6. Show younger men Christian love.** Most guys are not quick to even say in some Christian way, “I love you,” but it is obvious when Christian affection is present. Time spent, counsel offered, patience with youthful zeal, and rebukes gently or indirectly given—these kindnesses and many others could be listed as to how I knew my pastor loved me in Christ.

7. **Once a younger man is responsible enough, give him tasks of his own.** I was given opportunities to preach, teach, and clean the toilets, among a hundred other things. I eventually became the Christian school's dean of students and started dealing with parents. The church ordained me to be an assistant pastor. My pastor referred counseling situations to me on occasion. Receiving these tasks encouraged me to do well with what was placed before me.
8. **If necessary, encourage others to let the younger men serve.** I am sure there were more "give the kid a chance" conversations behind the scenes than I know about (and I'm certain that some took place). My pastor's recommendation was key for me in coming to my present church. Many opportunities to minister would never have been had without his encouragement to others.
9. **Teach younger men the Word of God, encourage them to uphold it, and warn them of what happens should they fail.** We had men my age who had been at our church walk away from our circles at the least and from the faith at the most. In discussing those things with my pastor as they came up, it was the last thing I desired to ever have him even think that I would do one, let alone the other.
10. **Remember, younger men will disciple younger men just as you disciplined them.** My assistant at my own church recently moved on, but while he was with us, I simply did with him for four years what my pastor had done with me. There's typically not a week or two that go by in which my assistant does not text me about something he is doing in ministry or learning in seminary. I'm nobody special, but I invested in him, just like I was taught. It apparently made enough of an impact for him to still want to tell me about the exciting things that the Lord is doing in his life.

Conclusion

Without doubt, countless others invested in me, helping me to be the Christian I am today. I think of my own father, mother, and brothers who regularly admonished me through their example and their words. Pastors, teachers, friends, and others—who could count them all? Whatever may be said of my own life, at least remember what we've seen in the relationship between Paul and Timothy. As you are able, learn from them and disciple younger men!

Bibliography

- The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* Timothy's name is explicitly mentioned 24 times in Scripture, a great starting point for your own study: Acts 16:1; 17:14, 15; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4; Rom 16:21; 1 Cor 4:17; 2 Cor 1:1, 19; Phil 1:1; 2:19; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 3:2, 6; 2 Thess 1:1; 1 Tim 1:2, 18; 6:20; 2 Tim 1:2; Phm 1; Heb 13:23. 1 and 2 Timothy are obviously a treasure trove of data as Paul wrote these letters directly to Timothy.
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Appendix: Timeline of Timothy with Paul

- AD 47–49 Timothy was probably saved during Paul’s first visit to Lystra (Acts 14:7–23; cf. 2 Tim 1:5). If still a young man in AD 65 and around 35 years old (cf. 1 Tim 4:12), Timothy was probably in his mid to late teens, being born approximately AD 30. He noticeably matured over the next couple of years (Acts 16:2).
- AD 50–52 Timothy began traveling with Paul for Paul’s second missionary journey (Acts 15:40–18:22; cf. 16:1–5; 17:14–15; 18:5; 1 Thess 1:1; 3:2, 6; 2 Thess 1:1). He was probably around 20 years old. He joined Paul in Lystra and went to Philippi in Macedonia. Only Paul and Silas were imprisoned during this journey, perhaps implying that Timothy was not quite as much as a spokesman for the gospel that Paul and Silas were. At the same time, Paul could trust Timothy to visit the Thessalonians (1 Thess 3:1–6), and when Paul was later in prison, the Philippians apparently requested that Timothy would return to them, remembering his selfless, Christlike ministry (Phil 2:19–22). After he continued with Paul to Thessalonica and Berea, they were temporarily separated as Paul was sent to Athens to avoid further persecution (Acts 17:14–15). They were reunited in Corinth for a time (Acts 18:5), and Timothy likely finished the missionary trip with Paul (cf. Acts 18:22).
- AD 53–57 Timothy traveled with Paul for Paul’s third missionary journey (Acts 18:23–21:17; cf. 19:22; Rom 16:21; 1 Cor 4:17; 16:10; 2 Cor 1:1, 19). Timothy was approximately in his early and mid 20s. He saw conversions, miracles, and book burnings in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–20). Timothy had grown in responsibility to be sent from Ephesus to Corinth in Macedonia in order to preach and continue to build up the church there (Acts 19:22; 1 Cor 4:16–17; 16:8–11). He saw Eutychus raised from the dead (Acts 20:4, 7–12). He would have met the Ephesian elders, perhaps even some that he had to discipline in time (Acts 20:4, 13–17; cf. 1 Tim 5:19–20). He saw the tearful goodbyes at Ephesus and Tyre (Acts 20:36–38; 21:4–6). He met Philip and his four daughters (Acts 21:8–9). He met James and the elders at Jerusalem (Acts 21:17).
- AD 57–59 Paul was then arrested and escorted to his various trials, spending some time in prison in Caesarea (Acts 21:27–26:32). Acts 20:4 was Timothy’s last mention in Acts, and Paul’s arrest likely broke their fellowship. We are left to conjecture Timothy’s whereabouts during this time. Perhaps he assisted Paul during this time as he would in Rome, but we have nothing Acts or Paul’s letters to help us make this conclusion.
- AD 60–62 Paul was eventually taken to prison in Rome where, based on the greetings in his “prison epistles,” he was reunited with Timothy (Acts 27–28; cf. Phil 1:1; 2:19; Col 1:1; Phm 1). Timothy was too useful to send away (cf. Phil 2:19–22). Timothy was about 30 years old.
- AD 62–66 Perhaps after joining Paul for a fourth missionary journey to Spain (? Rom 15:24; 2 Cor 1:17), Timothy was sent to Ephesus to minister and put the church in order (cf. 1–2 Tim).
- Combs (“Class Notes,” p. 79) suggests that the itinerary was for Paul to leave prison in Rome in AD 62, and then travel next to Spain (Rom 15:24, 28; AD 62–64), Crete (Titus 1:5; AD 64–65), Miletus (2 Tim 4:20; AD 65), Colossae (Phm 22; AD 66), Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3; AD 66), Philippi (Phil 2:23–24; 1 Tim 1:3; AD 66), and Nicopolis (Titus 3:12; AD 66–67). Paul would finally wind up in Rome, be imprisoned, and finally martyred (cf. 2 Tim 4:6–8; AD 67–68). Timothy remained in Ephesus and was about 30 to 35 years old. Timothy received his two letters from Paul during this time.
- AD 66 Paul was beheaded in Rome after his second imprisonment (cf. 2 Tim 4:6–8). Timothy was probably in his late 30s. While not an apostle, he would very much wear Paul’s mantle.
- AD 67–69? Timothy was imprisoned but released (Heb 13:23). Timothy was in his late 30s or even 40.