

Eat This, Not That: Feasting on the Scriptures Privately for Effective Ministry Publicly

Steve Burchett

We live life in two basic realms — private and public. Who we are in one sphere influences the other. This idea comes out in Paul’s words to Timothy, “If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed” (First Timothy 4:6). The phrase I wish to highlight is “being trained.” Perhaps seeing how that phrase is translated in verse 6 in the New English Translation will help: “By pointing out such things to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, *having nourished yourself* on the words of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed” (emphasis mine). Timothy was to communicate gospel truth and apostolic teaching publicly to the believers, but it was first to have “nourished” his own soul.



This all makes perfect sense to me as a Bible teacher. Positively, my teaching is so much better if what I am communicating has first gripped my heart. Additionally, lifelong learners of the Bible are far more interesting because of a freshness and excitement that always accompanies recent discovery. I had some professors in college and seminary who had been teaching the exact same information in the same ways for decades, and it showed (and bored!). Negatively, my ministry will at least be very weak, if not a massive failure, if I am not regularly nourished on the Bible, and also receiving sound teaching both on the printed page and through the solid, Christocentric teaching of others (if possible).

This is not only true for those who, like Timothy, have a public teaching ministry. We all are “servant(s) of Christ Jesus” in various ways. How will we be “good servants of Christ Jesus,” flourishing in our giftedness? One vital prerequisite is the regular intake of the truth when no one is looking. This will require not getting swept up in the rhetoric of the false teachers of our day. Paul says to Timothy, “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths” (v. 7). That doesn’t

mean we should avoid knowing something about false ideas that are being promoted, but time is valuable! What will lead to personal godliness and effective ministry that has the dynamic of the power of God at work? God’s words, or man’s? We know the answer. It’s like a book I see in thrift stores occasionally: *Eat This, Not That*. A healthy diet of the Scriptures makes a “good servant of Jesus Christ.”

But successfully digesting the Scriptures in private isn’t automatic and easy. Paul writes, “Rather train yourself for godliness” (7b). Paul uses an “exercise” word (different than “train” in v. 6) to make his point that godliness is the result of a disciplined life, a rigorous giving of oneself to growth in grace. It doesn’t matter if you own an \$800 Bible with a cover made from the skin of a goat once owned by a King of some country on the other side of the earth. Just possessing it does nothing for you! It’s the words inside that must regularly go into your mind and heart. And this is incalculably superior to “bodily training” because the godliness that is the result of spiritual exercise brings benefits both “for the present life and also for the life to come” (cf. Mark 10:29-30).

Think about someone who appeared to have an effective, God-honoring public ministry. Maybe one day, perhaps on the new earth, you will have the privilege of talking to that person. You might ask that individual, “What was the secret to your ministry?” I’m confident he or she will answer something like this: “Anything helpful that I did in public ministry was directly related to who I was in private — and regular, steady nourishment on the words of the faith and good doctrine was essential.”