# **Session 1 – Covenant: Step Up**

# **Bible Reading: 1 Timothy 4:7-15**

## TEACH - Content to help inform a small-group outline

### Introduction

* Invite the group to arrive, gather and set aside worries that might get in the way of what God wants to say through this small group.
* A short prayer might help, along these lines:
  + *Lord, we offer the next [hour / however long the session is] to you. Would you speak to us, through our listening and our sharing. Would you reveal what it means to respond to your covenant with us, in our daily realities. Would you teach us what stepping up to your call looks like, not in abstract ways but in the everyday. Come, Holy Spirit, and guide us now. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.*
* Explain that this small group is about diving into the first part of the theme of Covenant Sunday 2025 (Step Up). There will be another session that explores the second part of the theme (Stand Out).
* Invite someone to read 1 Timothy 4:7-15, the teaching text for Covenant Sunday 2025:
  + *‘Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.*
  + *‘Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practise these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.’ (ESV)*
* It might be interesting for someone to read it again, possibly in another translation (eg *NIV*, *NRSV* or *GNT*), to really allow the Scripture to ‘land’.

**Exploration**

### 1. A scenario to think about stepping up

* Share the following scenario with the group:
  + *Alex works for a company that has been facing challenges, leading to high turnover and low morale. The company has announced a new initiative to improve the work environment and is seeking volunteers for a task force to help shape the company’s culture and values.*
  + *Alex has been reflecting on 1 Timothy 4:7-15 and feels a nudge to step up and join the task force. However, Alex doesn’t fully agree with the current culture and values of the workplace and is struggling to know how to put faith into practice in this context.*
* Invite people to think about how Alex could respond, before sharing this with others. Depending on numbers, it might be a good idea to break into smaller groups, then come back together at the end to share what was discussed.
* Here are three discussion questions that might help:
  + How can the principles in 1 Timothy 4:7-15 guide Alex in contributing to the task force, especially when there are disagreements with the company’s culture and values?
  + In what ways can Alex be an example in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity in the workplace, particularly when these qualities seem to be in conflict with the prevailing culture?
  + How can Alex use spiritual gifts to serve colleagues and create a more positive work environment, while also staying true to personal beliefs and values?

**2.** Stepping up in 1 Timothy 4:7-15

* 1 Timothy is a letter from the Apostle Paul to his co-worker, Timothy, who had been put in charge of the church in Ephesus.
* There were a number of issues in this church, especially false teaching. Paul is calling Timothy to step up to his leadership role and confront these problems head-on.
* The passage talks about avoiding ‘irreverent, silly myths’ (v7). What might these be?
  + ‘The letter is first of all a warning against false teaching in the church. This teaching, a mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish ideas, was based on the belief that the physical world is evil and that one can attain salvation only by special secret knowledge and by practices such as avoiding certain foods and not marrying.’(Introduction to 1 Timothy in the *Good News Bible)*
* Paul is talking about stepping up to these (and other) falsehoods. But it’s not an abstract stepping up; he is calling believers to **step up in godliness.**
* To highlight this, he uses the image of physical training. But, unlike physical training, godliness has eternal value: ‘It holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come’ (v8).
* This isn’t just about personal godliness. Paul goes on to talk about **stepping up to set an example:** ‘Set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity’ (v12).
* Stepping up to our covenant relationship with God is both vertical (between us and God) and horizontal (our witness to others).
* Paul is clear that this stepping up is a shared call for all Christians. But he also points out that it looks different for each person, because we are all created to reflect God in unique ways.
* We see this when he talks about **stepping up in our gifts:** ‘Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you’ (v14).
* There are two tests available at the end of this small group outline that might help people discover their own spiritual gifts.
* While Paul is writing into a specific context (first-century Ephesus), he is also speaking to all followers of Christ. It might be good to pause at this point and have a moment of reflection with the following question: what is God saying to me about stepping up?

### 3. A story of stepping up: Desmond Tutu

* Watch the following video: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\_w7V1h4soUk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_w7V1h4soUk)
* Invite the group to discuss what links can be found between Desmond Tutu in 1980s-1990s South Africa and Timothy in first-century Ephesus. What can these two examples teach us about stepping up?

## REFLECT – questions for discussion / next steps

### Personal

* What ‘irreverent, silly myths’ (1 Timothy 4:7) have you believed in 2024? How do you want to make covenant with God your priority in 2025?
* 1 Timothy 4:14 talks about ‘gifts’ that God gives his children. There is the possibility to take two tests, which might help you discover how God is calling you to step up in 2025:
  + Wagner-Houts Modified Spiritual Gifts Questionnaire: email [resources@salvationarmy.org.uk](mailto:resources@salvationarmy.org.uk) to receive it in the post.
  + Free online Fivefold Ministry Test to discover Kingdom strengths as an apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd and teacher (APEST): [fivefoldministry.com/](https://fivefoldministry.com/)

### Community

* Stepping up isn’t purely vertical (between us and God); it is also about how we relate to others. What is God saying to you about this horizontal dimension of God’s covenant?
* How do you feel challenged to step up in your community? Is there a commitment you want to make for the year ahead?

### Response

* What grace do you need from God at the start of 2025, to help you respond to his covenant of love?
  + Courage?
  + Boldness?
  + Patience?
  + Peace?
  + Something else?

# **Session 2 – Covenant: Stand Out**

# **Bible Reading: 1 Timothy 4:7-15**

## TEACH - Content to help inform a small-group outline

### Introduction

* Welcome the group. It might be a good idea to recap what was explored in the first session, for those who weren’t there (and for those who were).
* A short prayer might help, along these lines:
  + *Loving Father, thank you for your covenant of love with us, your children. Would you inspire our discussion as we continue to explore what it means to respond to this covenant. Let this be your time, to do what you want to do. Prompt us by your Spirit. We want to live lives that reflect your covenant. Would you help us to do that, in Jesus’ name. Amen.*
* Explain that this small group is focused on the second part of the theme of Covenant Sunday 2025 (Stand Out). The previous session explored the first part of the theme (Step Up).
* Invite someone to read 1 Timothy 4:7-15, the teaching text for Covenant Sunday 2025:
  + *‘Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.*
  + *Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practise these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.’ (ESV)*
* It might be helpful read it a second time, maybe in another translation (eg *NIV*, *NRSV* or *GNT*), to really hear what the Scripture has to say.

### Exploration

### 1. An activity to think about standing out

* Start with a reflective activity to think about what it means to stand out. Explain that this is to reflect on the different emotions that can be associated with this (and that there are no ‘wrong’ emotions).
* Invite those in the group to think about two times in their life:
  + One time when they *chose* to stand out.
  + Another time when they stood out *but hadn’t chosen this.*
* Once people have thought about these two memories, invite them to share with a partner. What emotions relate to these two memories? The group might want to think about which experience was harder (and why).

### 2. Standing out in 1 Timothy 4:7-15

* A quick recap: 1 Timothy is a letter from the Apostle Paul to his co-worker, Timothy, who had been put in charge of the church in Ephesus.
* Paul is imploring the Ephesian church to live distinctively Christian lives: to stand out from the crowd.
* What is the context of this call to stand out?
  + ‘Paul wrote 1 Timothy to advise his coworker Timothy about issues in the church in Ephesus. False teachers are the main cause for the letter. Their teaching apparently involved incorrect assumptions about the law and not allowing marriage and certain foods. Paul’s real concern is with the results of the false teaching. For example, it promotes mere theories over solid truth. It also leads to arrogance and greed. Paul focuses on the fact that true Christianity is shown in lifestyles shaped by the gospel. Those whose lives are not shaped by the gospel have turned away from the faith.’ (Introduction to 1 Timothy in the *English Standard Version)*
* In the passage, we can see a number of ways Paul is calling Timothy and the Ephesian Christians to stand out.
* He wants them to **stand out in wisdom:** to not be seduced by ‘irreverent, silly myths’ (v7). It might be interesting to see how this verse is translated in different versions. For example, the *NIV* translates it as ‘godless myths and old wives’ tales’!
* The call here is about not believing everything. Paul wants the believers to stand out from the crowd, training themselves to be godly and discerning what is (and is not) from God.
* Paul’s heart is that the Ephesian Christians would also **stand out in discipline.** This is where he uses the image of an athlete: ‘While bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way’ (v8).
* Just as athletes are devoted to their (often rigorous) training, Christians are called to be devoted to godliness. It might be easier to neglect this, just as it is easy to neglect healthy living. But Paul is clear that Christians should prioritise devotion, even if it comes at a cost.
* This spiritual training isn’t for the sake of it; it allows us to **stand out in conduct.**
* Just look at these qualities that Paul says will define the Christian’s lifestyle: ‘Set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity’ (vv12-13).
* The implication here is that the prevailing lifestyle in first-century Ephesus was not marked by these things.
* End this section by inviting the small group to dwell in verses 13-15, which are particularly relevant to Covenant Sunday. They talk about what it means to **stand out in devotion:**
  + *‘Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practise these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.’ (vv13-15 ESV)*

### 3. A story of standing out: Danielle Strickland

* Watch the following video: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnX301a7peE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnX301a7peE)
* Invite the group to respond to the following question: What does Danielle Strickland’s testimony teach us about standing out as Christians, especially in the context of 1 Timothy 4:7-15?

## REFLECT – questions for discussion / next steps

### Personal

* In what ways have you (perhaps subtly) gone along with the crowd in 2024, without seeking God first? How do you want 2025 to be different?
* Is there an area of your personal life that is keeping you from God, perhaps an area of persistent sin? How do you want to pray into this at the start of 2025, to respond to what Jesus has done on the cross?

### Community

* Is there a community that God has placed on your heart? How might he be calling you to stand out in your response? Here are some ideas:
  + People experiencing homelessness
  + Refugees and asylum seekers
  + Elderly people
  + University students
  + People of other faiths (and none)

### Response

* What commitments do you want to make for 2025, as you respond to God’s covenant of love?
  + More regular reading of the Bible? *You might be interested in the Bible studies that are linked to Covenant Sunday 2025, available through the Resource Centre.*
  + A more consistent rhythm of prayer?
  + Serving in the community?
  + Something else?