

Approved Workmen

2 Timothy

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Bible Text: 2 Timothy 2

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Take your Bibles and let's turn together to 2nd Timothy chapter 2, page 995 I think it is in the church Bible. And I hope you understand me after ten days back in Britain. My accent has probably deteriorated back to what they do there. I mean to retranslate myself as I go along. I was met by friends at the airport and as they were taking me home they were complaining they couldn't understand a word I was saying. Which just goes to show that the longer I'm here...over there they were saying, "Stop talking with an American accent, they were saying that! Can you believe that?" It's rubbing off, so keep it coming. I'll learn how to speak English properly in due course.

So having refreshed my accent, we're going to refresh the series that we're in here in 2nd Timothy and for those of you who are visiting, let me be clear as we start that the stakes are as high as you can get as Paul writes this, the last letter that we have of Paul's and he's writing to Timothy, this young minister, about the kind of conditions that are immersing in the early church. And the big question that tells us why the stakes were so high, the big question was, will Christianity survive, will it survive the death of the Apostles? For example, will it survive the spiraling heresy that seemed to be corrupting the churches? Would it survive the numbers of people who are defecting from the early church? Is there a future for Christianity?

It seems almost remarkable sitting as we are doing this morning in this full building to think that Christianity was ever under such threat. But as Paul is writing this last letter, he is fully aware that there are people around like Timothy who are thinking, "Is there a future? Is there a future? Can we believe that there is a future?" And there are people in the world today who are asking the same question.

Having been back in the UK for a little while and talking to people there who are discouraged at the cause of the gospel there that has been in decline really for the last 50 years, the question is, "Is there a future? Is there a future for the gospel?" So it's a relevant question and Paul is writing to Timothy and he wants Timothy, and here is the key phrase I think, at the beginning of this chapter, in fact in verse 1, he wants Timothy to be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus. He knows that he is weak, that he is wondering, that he's worried and Paul wants him to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

And he's given him a charge. His charge has been that he should communicate the message that the future of Christianity hinges on the clarity and transmission of the gospel from one generation to the next. And his great anxiety in this letter is, get the gospel right, pass the gospel along because only the gospel, only the word of God is able to keep the church together and preserve the church's identity and secure the church's future. That's his message to Timothy in this book.

And as we come now to the verses we read today, he's now zeroing in on Timothy's own personal responsibility, his duty, the duty of a faithful worker. And he begins by asking Timothy to remind those that he's teaching of things that he's already learned. Now if you look back to verse 8 you'll find that Paul has already reminded Timothy, Timothy needs reminding and it's the business of the preacher, it's the business of each individual Christian to be reminding each other all the time of the things we've learned and to help us to re-learn them or remember them as we face the issues of every day. What he says to Timothy is, "Remind these leaders that you're appointing, remind them of these things that I've said to you and charge them before God not to quarrel about words." Do you notice the key phrase there is "before God?" Paul's concern is that there are false teachers in Ephesus, they are more conscious of men than God. And Paul is saying to Timothy when you're talking to these men that you're appointing as leaders in the church remind them, before God, remind them that they live their lives before the face of God. Not the face of men, but the face of God first of all. Then they are answerable to him, they are to look to him, they are to be conscious of him in all they do.

And he's to urge these men before God to beware of empty discussions and petty quarrels over words. Now what is he referring to here? Is he referring to the kind of competition that sometimes goes on among Christian people to be arguing about the rights and wrongs of things that are inconsequential? You know there are those issues that are nonessentials, there are those issues that are peripheral to Christianity about which we can very often find ourselves in fruitless discussion. We have our point of view, the other person has their point of view. Those points of view are not prescribed for us by the Bible, they are merely points of view that we may or may not hold to as Christian people. And there are all kinds of those irrelevant issues that people are arguing about them all the time. I've been in churches where they've had church meetings and they've really been at each other's throats because of these issues and they don't amount to a hill of beans these kind of nonessential things.

Is that what Paul is referring to here? I think the context suggests that he's not thinking about that at all, these are not inconsequential matters. The theme of this little section, verse 14-26, begins and ends with references to the opposition, the opposition that was going on in the church. And the words that were being fought with and over have to do with the content of the gospel because the effect of this war with words is that it's going to ruin the hearers. And we'll see what that means in a moment.

You see, there's a context, the context is that Paul has just been speaking to Timothy and said this, "Follow the pattern of sound or healthy words that you have heard from me." That's the prevailing or the constraining theme of this section. He said, "The gospel has

been given to us, it's been given to us through people like Paul, through the Apostles, it's an Apostolic gospel." It's not anybody's idea, it's the idea of those who have been equipped by the Spirit, set apart and called by the Lord Jesus who are eye witnesses of the risen Savior and to have been given divine revelation. They have given us the gospel, it's an Apostolic gospel. And it's been given by the Apostle to Timothy and it's been given in words, in a form, in a shape with particular words, with particular meanings.

And those particular words with particular meanings in a grammatical context are the words that enshrine the truth that God is communicating to his people. It has to shape the way we understand God and the way we understand reality and the way we understand ourselves and the way we understand the culture and the world. Those words, biblical words, are worth fighting for and they are worth fighting over.

And Timothy is told to remind people and to charge them before God not to quarrel about words which do no good, but only ruin the hearer. These words, these arguments, whatever was going on here, whatever these false teachers were doing, was they were engaging in some kind of esoteric discussion about the meaning and significance of the Christian message. They were perhaps engaging in clever wordplay. In a period shortly after this, we read about false teachers who were engaging in syllogism and etymologies of words and were building a whole new structure of belief on these kinds of weird and wonderful arguments. Paul says, "Don't go down that road." Why? because it ruins the hearers. The Greek word is "catastrophe." It turns the world upside down, it takes these people and instead of building them up, instead of making things clearer for them turns their world the wrong way up. Vain arguments, speculative, reengineering of the faith brings people down, it doesn't build them up.

What Paul is saying is those people do that, they engage in those kind of mindless arguments because they don't have an eye to God. They don't realize they're living before God, that what they're saying is being heard by God, that what they're teaching will be evaluated one day by God. And Paul says, "Remind them before God not to go down this road." He says to Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved." In other words I want *you* to live before the eye of God, I want *you* to live for God's approval, God's recommendation, God's "well done."

It's interesting actually as we read this, to discover the perspective of what these false teachers were doing. They had an eye not to God but to other people. They were looking at those around them. They were eager to say, to tell people what they wanted to hear, to tickle their ears with novelties than they were to tell the truth. They were conscious, not of God apparently, since Paul stresses that, "charge them before God, do your best to present yourself as one approved of God," and so on. Paul is conscious that these false teachers weren't doing what they were doing before the face of God but before the face of an audience, people they were trying to impress.

This happens today, doesn't it? When in academic circles it's our peers and the academy we try to impress. Or in the office it's our colleagues that we try to impress. And we're afraid, we fear being relegated to the trash can of history. We fear not being taken

seriously. The church often fears being ostracized or destroyed by the media. And Paul says to Timothy, “Give your best, make every effort, put your whole heart into the business of being approved by God. See that what you are doing as a believing person is done before the face of God and not before the face of men.” That’s absolutely vital. I think there’s a principle there that applies right across the borders, we shall see, to every aspect of our lives and our living.

But in particular, Paul says to Timothy, “Handle the word of God accurately.” This is the alternative to projecting, teaching or dreaming up some new idea in order to please the crowds who are looking on. He says, “Handle the word accurately, do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed rightly handling the word of truth.” Notice how he’s arguing here. How do I know that I have God’s approval? How do I know that before the face of God I have God’s “well done.” Here’s what he says, “You know that when you handle the word of God accurately then you will have no need to be ashamed, then you can stand, as it were, before God in God’s presence and you don’t need to be embarrassed and you don’t need to shrink with fear.”

And what is this word, what is this word that I am to work with? To labor with? I know he’s talking here about a minister like Timothy and he’s saying, “This is your hard labor, this is your work, you are to labor and work with the word of God.” But all of us to a greater or lesser degree have the same job to do, we all of us struggle as Christian people with what the word of God says. Paul calls it the word of truth. Back in verse 9 he calls it the word of God. Earlier in chapter 1 he calls it the gospel. Here when he calls it the word of truth he wants to signal to us that it communicates absolute truth, absolute truth. The opponents were feeding error, the Apostles were teaching truth from God.

And what does it mean to handle rightly the word of truth? Literally it means to cut a straight path or if you’re copying some model maybe you’re doing a statue, you’re doing something with a chisel and a hammer and you’re making a statue and you’re following a picture or a portrait of somebody standing in front of you as you’re trying to represent what you see and that’s what the Apostle is saying here, “Make sure that you’re doing this according to the pattern, that the plow is going straight.” In other words, when you’re handling the word of God don’t look for esoteric meanings, don’t reinvent its meaning, don’t add to it, don’t subtract from it, don’t read into it, don’t deviate from it. Be straight with it. Let the word of God say what it says and say it straight to your heart. Don’t feel you need to make an apology for it, don’t think for one minute that you need to divert from its path.

Because there are some that do so. Paul refers to them in verse 18, “Some have swerved from the truth. They’ve missed the target. They’ve deviated from the path.” Paul uses this idea, this word for “swerving” a number of times in 1st Timothy chapter 1, verse 16, “Some have swerved from a pure heart and a good conscious and sincere faith and have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.” Swerving from the truth.

In 1st Timothy, 6, “Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.” And now he uses the same word. Some people are swerving away from the truth and Paul says to Timothy, “Be sure you don’t do that. Cut a straight path. Handle the word of God and handle it carefully and accurately.”

Now he’s underlining this, you see, because and there’s a bit of irony in his voice as he speaks in verse 16, “Avoid irrelevant babble for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness.” He’s thinking of these false teachers. These false teachers are coming along and they’re saying, “We’re cutting edge.” He uses this image of the cutting edge. They say, “We’re the cutting edge, we are the advanced people, we are much more in tune with the culture, we’re much more in tune with the academics, we’re right at the cutting edge of what the church is teaching. And you might hear some people and they are very traditional and so on but we are leading the field in the understanding of what the faith is.” The word that’s used there about leading people means to cut down in front, it means to pursue a new path and to push your way into some new territory. Paul says that’s what these people think that they’re doing. He’s being ironic here. He says, “They’re leading people.” Yes, they’re cutting a fresh path. Yes, they’re out ahead of us. Yes, they are being creative and they are doing the leading and people are following them, but they’re not progressing, they’re not progressing in their understanding of God, they’re not progressing in their grasp of the faith. They’re progressing away from God, away from godliness into more and more and more ungodliness. By ungodliness what does he mean? He means not being aware of the reality of God in their lives.

Now you can see how this applies today, there are many that come along and would claim to be giving contemporary or relevant teaching to the church. One of the things they do is recast Christian truth. They think they’re cutting edge.

I was reading, I’m still in this British time thing and got up early this morning and I was reading a blog which is a bad thing to do. This particular blog was reporting a paper that had been given at a particular conference recently and the issue that was being discussed was the issue of the historical Adam, you’ll be fed up of me bringing that up and it’s the cutting edge area of controversy that there is in the church today certainly in our Presbyterian Church in America. And this particular scholar was arguing that you couldn’t accept a literal Adam for two reasons. One, the reality of evolution and two, the hall of biblical scholarship, those were his two reasons.

And he recognized that there was a problem there, the problem with not accepting a literal Adam is that Jesus did and he frankly admits that to be the case. But he has a solution to the problem of Jesus believing in a literal Adam when evolution obviously disbelieves in it and discounts it and he goes on to argue that Jesus became fully human. Here are his arguments, three points. We humans have all sorts of false beliefs. Jesus was fully human, ergo, Jesus too must’ve had false beliefs. That is his argument. So the simple solution to the problem is this, Jesus was wrong about Adam.

Now you see, that kind of reasoning, I think, falls into the category of these people who have swerved from the truth and who are quibbling about words and who are trying to reinterpret the Christian faith in a way that people looking on are happy with. See, in the course of an interview after this particular lecture, this speaker goes on to argue that in fact scientific consensus teaches evolution, therefore that argument is over. Biblical scholarship must follow the scientific consensus.

The interviewer asked the question, “Does that mean that at no point,” or perhaps better phrased as, “is there any point at which the biblical theologian says to the scientific or any other community, this is a challenge to your position?” And his response was to say, “No, where there is a scientific consensus the church, i.e. the Bible, has to be accommodated to that consensus.” Now what that is illustrating is somebody who is not living before God, before God.

The word of God trumps every other discipline because the natural mind, the mind, rationality, is fallen rationality. And at the end of the day even if it tests your faith, and by the way I’m not arguing for any specifics here, but even if it tests your faith, if it makes you embarrassed in the academy, tough. Seriously, that’s what it means to live by faith. Hebrews says it, “By faith we know the world was created by God,” that visible things came from the invisible God.

So Paul is saying, “These kind of reinventions of Christianity, these kind of reinterpretations of the cross or justification or of God’s foreknowledge, these things don’t actually lead people deeper into God, they lead to more and more ungodliness.” Because what you’re saying, you see, is the word of God, is not the priority, it is not supreme, it is not overall and when you move away from that word of God, you’re moving deeper and deeper and deeper, not into truth but into ungodliness. Paul says, “People have swerved away from these things.”

Now how should we deal with this? Paul gives us an example of how to deal with this. He begins by mentioning the ringleaders among them he says are Hymenaeus and Philetus who have swerved from the truth saying that the resurrection has already happened. They’re upsetting the faith of some. Now I want you to notice, this again illustrates the principle that I’ve just laid down in that illustration, watch this. Hymenaeus, mentioned earlier in this letter, was one of two men who’d been excommunicated by the church of Ephesus where Timothy is the minister. But he hasn’t gone away, he’s still there along with this man Philetus and they’re leading a group, a small group within the church or maybe a large group for all we know, and they’re promoting this new idea, this new notion. And Paul specifies what this new notion is. This new notion is “the resurrection has already happened.” What is the point of that? Place them in their cultural context. In the Greek world of their day, the flesh, human flesh was regarded by people who were into spiritual things, human flesh was regarded as evil, absolutely evil. People wanted out of the flesh. That’s why Gnosticism grew in the second century because those who were interested in having real spiritual life and so on wanted to be involved in the movement that was denying the flesh, that was moving away from a fleshly corporal, corporeal, physical kind of existence to the life of the spirit, the

realm of the spirit. And these people were living in that context. So every time they had to say to people Jesus Christ is God incarnate, carne flesh, in flesh.

You see it was in the face of every idea that was popular in the culture. It was absolutely a shameful thing for so many people. It was a hindrance to the advancement of the gospel. And so they come up with this idea, we mustn't say then that Jesus' physicality has been raised from the dead. We can believe in a spiritual resurrection like we used to sing about when we were children, "He lives, he lives. Christ Jesus lives today, walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way. He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives within my heart." There's nothing challenging to Greek philosophy about that. "He lives within my heart. My father lives within my heart, my mother lives within my heart, my grandmother lives within my heart. I see their faces, I hear their voices, Jesus lives within my heart." That's what's a confrontation with the world, they can cope with that, you see, the Greek world of Paul's day.

And so these false teachers were saying the resurrection is a spiritual resurrection. In every error there is a germ of truth. Does the Bible teach spiritual resurrection? Yes, it does. We were crucified with Christ we've been raised with Christ, we're in the heavenly places with Christ, that's the reality. Resurrection in the New Testament has two parts to it, there is spiritual resurrection. That spiritual resurrection is seen in men and women, boys and girls who come to believe in the Lord Jesus, that's not a natural thing that happens, people don't do that normally or naturally.

In the UK about six or seven percent of the population will be in church today because the majority of the population don't believe in the risen Jesus, that's not an actual thing to do. It's not a normal thing to do, it takes spiritual resurrection for that to happen. And spiritual resurrection according to the New Testament is part One of the resurrection. Part Two of the resurrection is the resurrection of the body. This body raised to new life, that's God's purpose. And Paul is saying to him, to Timothy to, "Handle the word of God and you're to handle it accurately. And you have to guard it faithfully."

And then thirdly he says, "You need to trust the word of God completely." You see, the work of these two men and others was a direct challenge to the authority of the Apostle and the gospel message. The very presence of error in the church and disputes in biblical subjects has the effect of unsettling people. We don't really want arguments, we're all very nice people, we don't like arguments, it's better not to say anything really than to have an argument. Certainly in the culture that I come out of, a passive aggressive approach, being nice to everybody and never actually saying what's on your mind is the order of the day.

But the reality is, of course, that in the pursuit of truth you have to say where error lies, you can't avoid that. You have to compare and contrast because vagueness doesn't get it. I remember being taught and for some years tried to follow this advice that what you should do is to preach the gospel simply positively and people will get it and they'll be able to discern right from wrong, good from bad. The problem with that advice is it doesn't work. It doesn't work. Because somebody comes along and they use some of the

same phrases as I use and what people do is they put it through the grid of what they've been taught but they don't realize that this person is leaving out key things. Or he means something different by what he's saying. In other words, there's got to be comparison and this is what you find in the Apostle Paul, he compares and contrasts truth with error. These people are in error, these people are in truth. It's a part of the gospel work.

But the effect of that, the effect of error in the church and the effect of false teaching in the church is to create a climate of uncertainty, that's what the Apostle is addressing in these verses. He understands that, he understands that the presence of heresy and heretics in the church raise questions in the mind of believers about the stability and the permanence of the church. I've had these conversations with people back in England over last week and in those conversations people were saying to me, "Is there any hope for England?" When I left two years ago there seemed to be quite a coherence especially in London, a coherent evangelical position. I now find that people who are my friends have kind of been subdividing into various groups and have lost that coherence and that unity in the gospel.

And it raises questions, "Is there any hope? Is there any future for Christianity?" Here's what Paul says, "God's firm foundation stands bearing this seal, the Lord knows those who are his and let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." There's a foundation. Jesus is the cornerstone. The Apostles are the foundation, their apostolic message about Jesus, the church is built on that foundation. We are built into that foundation, the church is part of that foundation.

"And the Lord knows those who are his." There is a remnant according to the election of grace. That phrase "the Lord knows those who are his" comes from Numbers 16 where there's a story of a man called Korah who rebelled against Moses. He disputed Moses' authority and he wanted to say that he, Korah, was as legitimate as a priest of God. If he had wanted to be a priest of God he could've been a priest to God and also speak the word of God. And his work, Korah's work, challenged the authority of Moses, God's prophet. And God through Moses warned the people, "The Lord knows those who are his." You don't have to worry about it, the Lord knows those who are his and when the time comes he will distinguish between the two. In the story God intervenes, he destroys Korah and his people.

And Paul quotes that because he wants you to learn there's coming a day when God will vindicate the truth, when he will yet be the friend of truth, when it will be demonstrated to the world that he knows his own people. They may be small in number, they may be a remnant according to the election of grace but he knows those who are his. He keeps them safe, his seal is that he knows them, he will keep them by his power, by his work, he will not lose them, he will not lose them. The church cannot finally fail. We may yet face persecution, we may yet have to put our money where our mouth is in terms of our service to Jesus. And suffering *for* Jesus but Christ will yet be a friend to truth. He will yet turn up and there will be a day of vindication, there will be a day when all the enemies of God are put under the feet of our Lord Jesus.

Paul says, “The Lord knows those who are his. And in the meantime let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.” There he’s thinking of the iniquity of error, the iniquity of false teaching. That those who name the name of the Lord, that is, that those who with God’s people from the very dawn of time have been calling on the name of the Lord in worship, believing Israelites and believing Christians, believing in the same Lord Jesus, one as they look forward to him, we as we look back to him from the earliest days we’ve called on that name, THE name. We’ve worshipped him. Paul says that those who call on the name of Jesus, those who gather to worship, let them forsake iniquity, the iniquity of false teaching and cling to Christ, cling to Christ.

We live in dangerous days for the church, dangerous days for us. Our children are growing up and they will find their faith in Christ assaulted from every side. But don’t despair, don’t let the turkeys get you down. I now know some American phrases, probably misuse them, but you can correct me afterwards. Ultimately we know the end of the story. That’s what the book of Revelation is there in the Bible to tell you. The end of the story is the Lamb, the Lamb of God wins over all his enemies.

So let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord depart from iniquity. “The Lord knows those who are his.”

Let’s pray.

Father, we thank you for words of encouragement to all of us. We all find ourselves in a daily battle in which we’re tempted to be more conscious of what our family, our peers, our colleagues think and say and teach and believe. And we’re tempted to cut the cloth of the gospel to suit the prevailing culture. We pray that you would give us faithfulness to what’s been revealed. We pray Lord, that you’d give us courage to stand for Jesus. We pray that you would strengthen us by the power of your Holy Spirit that in the midst of a changing world we would not give in to despair or discouragement but rather we would find our security in your election, your knowledge, your purpose and your grace. We pray this in Jesus’ strong name. Amen.