

Cutting It Straight

2 Timothy 2:14–19

If you could go back and speak a word to your younger self, what would it be? What you would say to the younger you says a lot about what you value.

Some of us would be tempted to start with the practical. Would you go back and whisper next week's winning lottery numbers? Be honest. That thought might cross your mind quicker than you might want to admit. And that is the point. The word we would go back in time to deliver reveals what we think would secure us.

More than once, I have heard a similar question asked of older ministers. In a recent interview, R. T. Kendall, successor to Martyn Lloyd-Jones at Westminster Chapel, was asked:

“After some seventy years in ministry, what would you say to the young R. T. Kendall?” Kendall pointed to Acts 4:13, where the leaders of Jerusalem were astonished by the bold preaching of Peter and John. They could see that they were ordinary men who were not trained by the schools of the day. Yet it was obvious they had been with Jesus.

The authority they demonstrated did not come from credentials. It came from communion with Christ. Then Kendall shared what he would say to his younger self, and to younger ministers today:

“Know your Bible and pray a lot. That's it.”

That was not a simple-minded answer. Kendall is a trained theologian. But he had learned that usefulness does not begin with degrees or eloquence. It begins with knowing the Word and abiding with Jesus in Scripture-saturated prayer.

Paul is doing something like that with Timothy. He is the older man speaking to the younger leader. Second Timothy is his final letter,

written when the time of his departure was at hand. And in our text his charge is not, “win the crowd.” It is, “Handle the Word of God so that people are helped and God is pleased.”

Main Idea: Faithful workers do not use words to win arguments or applause. They handle God’s Word with diligence so that hearers are helped, God is pleased, and the church stands firm.

This morning, we will focus on the charges Paul gives the next generation of gospel workers.

The first charge that rises from this passage is this: **Don’t use words to win the argument and ruin the hearers.**

Paul instructs Timothy in verse 14: “*Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.*” 2 Timothy 2:14

When Paul says “these things,” he is not handing Timothy a new church growth plan. He wants the church to be grounded in the gospel. He is pointing back to what he has already said. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the offspring of David, the King God promised long ago. The gospel is trustworthy. And the word of God is not bound.

Timothy’s first work is not to invent something impressive. It is to put those things back in front of the people again and again.

Then Paul gives this charge within the charge. He says, *charge them before God*. In other words, Timothy is to give this warning knowing God is watching. God is listening to the way we talk to each other, especially when it is about His Word.

What is he forbidding? Quarreling about words. Paul is not against careful study. He is not against defining terms. He spent his life contending for the faith. **What he is against is the kind of talk that loves the fight more than the flock.** It is conversation that is technically religious and spiritually useless. It sounds intelligent. And

perhaps it can even gather a following. But verse 14 says it “does no good.”

Furthermore, Paul says this kind of quarreling “only ruins the hearers.” That warning should make us slow to speak and quick to listen. He is not talking about a harmless difference of opinion. He is saying that words can wreck people. And not only openly false words. But proud words. Clever words. Words used to gain admiration. Yet you can leave a discussion having been right on a point and having done harm to a soul.

Some of us were trained to win arguments. We grew up in homes, classrooms, or even in churches where the sharpest person in the room was treated as the most spiritual.

Life online rewards the same instinct. The hot take gets the applause. But the careful word gets ignored. If we are not watchful, the church starts rewarding that same spirit too. We become people who are sharp but not discerning. And the result is that people leave bruised, not built up.

Paul did not want a young leader to live that way. After we speak, the question should not first be, “Did I win?” The question should be, “Were the hearers helped?” Did they see Christ more clearly? Were they strengthened to endure? Or did they walk away impressed with us but still exhausted in their walk?

Brothers and sisters, this doesn’t just apply to pastors. Parents, teachers, small-group leaders, and anyone who talks about the Bible around a table can do this same damage.

You do not have to stand in a pulpit to ruin a hearer. You only have to love being right more than you love the person in front of you.

We do not live to win arguments with words. We live to help people with His Word.

Paul’s next charge is this: **Seek God’s approval, not man’s applause.**

He continues in verse 15, *“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 first the audience here. *Present yourself to God.* Not to the crowd. Not to the critics. Not to the people who will leave if the sermon is too close to home. Not to the voices that say a church will grow if you mainly preach to felt needs. Present yourself to God.

That one phrase can rescue a minister. It has rescued me many times. But it can also expose us. Many of us care more about what human eyes see than what God sees. We can change like a chameleon to fit the room. But Paul calls Timothy to look higher. The worker who finishes well is the worker who wants to be approved by God.

When Paul says, “Do your best,” he is not talking about leftover energy after everything else is finished. He is talking about your best grace filled efforts. The picture is a workman, not a performer.

This workman studies. He labors in prayer. He stays with the meaning of the text. He would rather be careful than impressive. He would rather be faithful on Tuesday morning in his study, with an open Bible and no one watching, than be applauded on Sunday for a line that was clever but was not the point of the text.

This danger is not only a first century one. It shows up whenever we want the appearance of work without doing the hard work.

I read recently that a Mississippi history professor hid a word in a midterm exam question that only an AI tool would copy. Thirty-two of his thirty-five students turned in the machine’s answer. They may have submitted something that looked finished. But they did not do the work, so they did not learn.

What’s going to happen to the next generation if this trend continues? A tool may save time, but it can also kill the growth that only comes through hard work—in the classroom, in the study, and in the soul.

Q

Worse still, that same shortcut now sits in front of preachers and congregations. A pastor can let an AI tool draft an entire sermon that he takes into the pulpit on Sunday morning. And any of us can let a tool summarize a passage or answer our Bible-study questions and still feel informed.

But if we skip the labor of diving into the word we may pass in public but starve in private.

Carey Nieuwhof, who has written widely on AI and the future of the church, has warned pastors that AI can be a research assistant, but it becomes dangerous when it replaces wrestling with the text. “The initial struggle is yours,” he says. “Don’t ask ChatGPT what the text means. You go do the hard work.”

Charles Spurgeon urged his pastoral students to devote time to diligent study. To neglect that discipline, Spurgeon said, would be to give congregations “poverty-stricken sermons.”

The church still needs pastors who actually study the Bible week in and week out.

Used rightly, a tool can help you find a quote, check a date or fact, tighten a sentence you already wrote, find a cross reference you half remember or ask for opposing views.

Used wrongly, it cuts the text for you, prays none of the prayers, bears none of the weight, and leaves both preacher and people unformed.

Let the tool serve you, the workman, after you have stayed in the text and in prayer. But don’t let it replace you. As verse 15 charges us, the approved workman has to present himself to God.

When verse 15 speaks of a workman who has “no need to be ashamed,” Paul is not mainly talking about social embarrassment. He is talking about the shame of a workman who mishandles the Word in the sight of God. When that kind of work is tested, it will not stand.

Then Paul says the approved workman “rightly handles the word of truth.” That phrase means slicing a straight path through what God has said. In other words, cut it straight.

Do not force a meaning the text does not carry. Do not use a verse as a launching pad for your opinion. Do not skip the hard sentences so nobody will feel uncomfortable. Do not treat the Bible like ammunition for your own cause. Say what God said. Mean what God meant. Let the surrounding verses guide you. Let the whole Bible align you. Don’t make the text a servant of your agenda.

Spurgeon said it powerfully:

“The Word of God is like a lion. You don’t have to defend a lion. All you have to do is let the lion loose, and the lion will defend itself.”

Our job is not to tame the text. Our job is to let it speak.

Alistair Begg put it this way: “The unashamed workman doesn’t set out to impress but rather to instruct. He seeks not to bamboozle people but to grant clarity. Indeed, no matter how skilled and deft a pastor may be with words, it will never be his words that pierce the hearts of men and women. Only God’s Word, rightly handled, brings about gospel transformation.”

Again, this is one reason we preach through books of the Bible. Walking through the text is not just a style preference. It is a safeguard. How many of you know, left to ourselves, we will return to the passages we like and avoid the ones that confront us. We would choose verses that support what we already wanted to say.

Walking through a letter like Second Timothy keeps us from turning Scripture into a buffet. It forces us to receive the whole counsel of God, including the parts that will not flatter a consumer and will not grow a crowd by entertainment.

We preach first for an audience of One. Accolades come and go. But God's approval remains and is all we need.

Young leaders, you will feel this pressure. Some people will want less resurrection and more therapy. Some will want less repentance and more affirmation. Some will tell you that if you want to reach the next generation you must make the message more palatable. Cut it straight anyway.

The workman God approves is not always the one everyone quotes. The next generation does not need a smoother Jesus. They need the One and Only.

The final charge is this: **Refuse gangrene teaching and stand on God's firm foundation.**

Paul continues: *"But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene."*
2 Timothy 2:16-17

Paul is not trying to be shocking. He's being real. He's urgently diagnosing a cancer that can kill a church.

There is a kind of religious talk that is toxic. Paul says it spreads like gangrene. In other words, it enters the life of a church the way an infection enters a body. The epicenter is not the Wuhan lab. It's an untamed tongue. And it does not produce holiness. Verse 16 says it leads people into more and more ungodliness.

And it spreads because this kind of talk appeals to the flesh. It flatters our cultural and emotional sensibilities. It sounds kind. It feels relevant. But it leaves people unconverted, unfed, and increasingly comfortable with sin.

Then Paul names names. That should sober us. He writes in verses 17 and 18,

"Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some."

Notice that these men did not necessarily throw Christian language away. Paul says they swerved from the truth. They kept talking about resurrection, but they emptied it of its present power and future, bodily hope. They said, in effect, the real thing has already happened in some spiritualized way, so don't look for the Lord to raise the dead.

That kind of teaching does not only confuse the mind. Paul says it upsets the faith of some. Real people are shaken.

This is how much of the false teaching today still works. It does not always kick the Bible out the front door. It redefines the supernatural until nothing costly or eternally valuable remains. The Bible is treated like a buffet. **People take the verses that soothe and leave the verses that summon.** The resurrection is quietly set aside because it is too miraculous for modern taste.

So a therapeutic gospel replaces a saving gospel. And felt needs start driving the sermon instead of the point of the text.

Sadly, preachers cave because they care more about the feelings of those who cannot endure sound doctrine than the hunger of those who can. The result is tragic. We starve the saints in order to keep the consumers.

Now Paul does not expose this danger to make Timothy more anxious. He immediately anchor's him. Verse 19 says,

"But 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.'"

The foundation is not our cleverness. It is not our ability to hold the attention of an audience. It is God's foundation. And verse 19 says it will stand.

And on that foundation Paul sees two inscriptions, which he describes as seals stamped into stone.

The first inscription is comfort: “*The Lord knows those who are his.*” We do not have to manipulate the message to protect the people of God. The Lord is not confused about who belongs to Him. We are to preach the truth. He will keep His own.

Those who belong to Him will be able to stand, even when the word is exposing their hearts. Those who do not belong to Him may despise it. That is not first our assignment to fix. Our assignment is to be faithful.

The second inscription is a call: “*Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.*” It is not enough to say the Name. The Name of the Lord must be honored.

What is iniquity? Iniquity is crookedness of life—not a moment of weakness, but a path we keep walking while still claiming His name.

Cutting the Word straight is not only a pulpit skill. It’s a lifestyle. The approved workman is not a man or a woman who wins religious debates while living in the dark.

Saying the right things in public and living the wrong way in private will not keep a life or ministry together for long.

So, we let God sort out who belongs to Him. We refuse the gangrene talk Paul warns about. We will not water the Word to keep carnal people comfortable. The unadulterated truth is not a barrier to real faith. It is the means God uses to make real faith stand.

Conclusion

Paul’s last words continue forming the unashamed worker. After exhorting Timothy to remember Jesus, endure hardship, and trust the unbound word, he adds: handle that word like a workman who will answer to God.

What about us?

Some of us may need to repent of loving the argument—of being more eager to impress than to be useful.

Some of us need to repent of fearing man—of being selective with the text, or even silent, so no one would be offended with us.

Some of us who name the name of Christ in public need to depart from the iniquity we have been practicing in private.

God's firm foundation still stands. Build your life on it. Do not ruin people with words that just want to win. Seek God's smile, not man's applause. Cut the text straight. And leave the results with the Lord. He knows His own.