

There is an old story preachers love to tell about a guy who is seeking guidance for his life. Not knowing where to turn, he picks up a Bible, opens it to a random page, and points his finger on a verse. It lands in Luke 15:16 on the parable of the Prodigal Son which says, “and he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate.” Not fully convinced that this was God’s will for his life, he flipped some pages, pointed his finger, and read Luke 10:37, which says, “You go, and do likewise.” Still dissatisfied, he tries one more time, and landing on John 13:27 and reading, “What you are going to do, do quickly.”

Now, we can have a good laugh at that. Some of us may have even tried that in our lives, likely recognizing that it’s not the best way to use God’s Word. But how do we respond when those in the church are unclear about what the Bible says or hold beliefs that don’t agree with Scripture?

The first day I stepped foot in Fellowship Dallas, I was fuzzy on a few things. I wasn’t entirely sure why Jesus had to die. I was pretty convinced that my behavior had something to do with how I would be spending my eternity...and I was doing a great job! And I sure as heck had no idea why the church wanted me to hang out in a small group with a bunch of weird Christians.

You may hold some of these views, and if you do, you’re in great company. Not only are you not alone in this church, you’re not alone in this time. It is an issue that’s been around for 2,000 years, and thankfully it’s one that is remedied when we are exposed to sound doctrine on a regular basis.

This morning we continue in our series in 2 Timothy called *Reminded*. Paul has spent a great deal of this letter reminding Timothy of what is true, not just for himself, but so that he can remind others. And in today’s passage, we are going to see that the competing views of the Gospel that existed in Ephesus before the time of Jesus, and the new ones that arrived after the day of Pentecost, have begun to find their way into the church, and people are being led astray. Now if you are familiar with Paul’s letters, you know he spends a great deal of his time both declaring the truth of the Gospel and refuting theology that is contrary to the Gospel. But Paul knows he’s not going to be around to much longer to do that work, so he challenges his disciple Timothy with the responsibility of knowing the truth and stewarding the truth. There is work to be done. The challenge to Timothy is the same challenge to you and me.

[2 Tim 2:14-19] 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. 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. ¹⁶ But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, ¹⁷ and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, ¹⁸ who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. ¹⁹ 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.”

Let’s begin with v15. Paul tells Timothy he wants him to be an approved worker. The word translated as “approved” describes someone whom God has tested, deemed good, and judged worthy.

To obtain this approval, Timothy is instructed to do his best, which sort of makes him sound like he's a Cub Scout. But the command here is to be diligent in his work, to make every effort, to passionately pursue God's approval and God's truth. The word translated "do your best" is the same word used to describe the shepherd's response to the angel's message about the birth of Jesus. It says "they went with haste", an immediate and expectant response to the message, and their pursuit of the Word made flesh is a model for us in our pursuit of the word of truth.

Look, our new mission is "calling each other to live out our God given purpose in Christ every day." It's not "calling each other to dabble in our God given purpose." It's to LIVE OUT! That requires our life, all of us, all we have to give. And with what frequency? Occasionally? When we can find the time? No. EVERY DAY! The beginning of living out our God given purpose is diligently pursuing God's given Word.

"God has hidden every precious thing in such a way that it is a reward to the diligent, a prize to the earnest, but a disappointment to the slothful soul. All nature is arrayed against the loungers and the idlers. The nut is hidden in its thorny case; the pearl is buried beneath the ocean waves; the gold is imprisoned in the rocky bosom of the mountains; the gem is found only after you crush the rock which encloses it; the very soil gives its harvest as a reward to the laboring farmer. So truth and God must be earnestly sought." –A.B. Simpson (theologian and missionary)

An approved worker is diligent. God's testing, his inspection, is not limited to just our effort, but also of the quality of our work. Paul tells Timothy that an approved worker has no need to be ashamed. He's mentioned shame several times in this letter, saying that he and Timothy have no need to be ashamed at the disapproval of other men. But here he's speaking of the approval of God, and that comes when we pursue excellence in our work.

Last year Martha told me that one of the faucet handles in our bathroom was leaking and she was going to call a plumber to fix it. I objected and insisted that I could handle it myself. So I went to Home Depot, explained the issue, I purchased the replacement parts, went home and "fixed" the problem. And I would like to show you the glory of my workmanship. There were apparently a couple small, nuanced things I didn't know to do, and so this was how I had to install the handle. Based on this picture, I am clearly a disapproved worker who should be ashamed.

But you know what the real problem was? This thing worked. I could turn that handle on the right and it brought forth water. And although it looked like garbage, for a moment, I was contented by the disease known as "Good enough". And as I read this passage, I was convicted. Where in my life, in my ministry, is God getting my "good enough"? Where am I content with something that works, but isn't my best? Is it this sermon (don't answer that)? And where I am allowing those I lead be content with "good enough".

I'm so thankful the Father didn't give us his "good enough". No, he gave us his very best. He gave us his only begotten, his one-of-a-kind Son. I'm so thankful Jesus didn't give his "good enough". No, he gave his very best. He lived a perfect life and died a perfect death to satisfy the perfect law of a perfect God. I'm so thankful the Holy Spirit doesn't give us his "good enough".

No, he gives his very best. He comes into those who follow Christ and brings eternal life where there was death. He inspires writers like Paul to bring forth the perfect Word of God, opens the eyes and mind of those who read it, and reminds us of the truth as we go forward in our lives. He is our model.

Listen, this isn't a call to perfectionism, and it's not meant to cause you to hang your head in shame as you leave. I had a conversation with a new mom recently who is really struggling because she hasn't been able to do all the things she used to do, and she's feeling guilty about it. The message to her is "do the best you can." The challenge for all of us is to assess what we are giving to God and to make sure we are giving him the very best we can.

It is through our diligent work for the Lord, where we give our all, and through our pursuit of excellence, where we give our best, that allows us to rightly handle the word of truth. Paul describes the proper handling of the truth with the idea of guiding or cutting a straight path. Think about plowing a row in a field or cutting a board straight. His call in Ephesus was to accurately teach truth for the building up of the church there and to cut straight through the false teaching that was starting to take root. The call is the same for us.

Paul then tells Timothy there are three things an approved worker is to do.

An approved worker reminds others of the truth. V14 starts "**Remind them of these things.**" What are "these things"? It's all the things Paul has said so far in this letter. His reminding of Timothy is not just for his benefit, it's to encourage Timothy to be the reminder of those in Ephesus. He has reminded Timothy of his heritage of faith. He has reminded him of the gift of God. He has reminded him of the Gospel. He has reminded him of his calling. He has reminded him to pass it on. And he has reminded him of our foundation, who is Jesus Christ. It's now Timothy's job to remind those in Ephesus of all these things.

As these outside ideas begin to show up in the Ephesian church, Paul's message to Timothy is that he doesn't have to make it up, and neither do we. As approved workers, rightly handling the truth, a great part of our ministry is to remind others what we've read and learned and been told. It's how we pass on our faith to our kids. It's how we share the Gospel with someone who doesn't know Jesus. And it's how we care for each other. That's why groups are so important. One of the great ministries the body of Christ has is to preach the Gospel to each other.

Who in your circle is struggling with fear? Remind them they've been given a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control. (1:7)

Who in your circle is self-conscious about being public with their faith? Remind and encourage them to not be ashamed of our Lord. (1:8)

Who in your circle is struggling with who Jesus is? Remind them that he saved us, that he abolished death and brought life and calls us to a holy calling. (1:9-10)

Who in your circle has experienced a devastating and heartbreaking loss? Remind them to remember Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead, defeating the grave. (2:8)

What an awesome privilege we all have to pass on to our brothers and sisters in the faith the things that were passed on to us. We have the opportunity to be an encourager to the downcast, a

comforter to those in pain, a teacher to the learner. An approved worker is a conduit of truth, a walking billboard for the Gospel, reminding others what they themselves have come to know.

An approved worker rejects debate and speculation about the truth.

Would you agree that there's a lot of noise in the world these days? It's nothing new. People have been arguing about theology and politics and church music and celebrities and gluten for centuries! And while we may be quick to just dismiss it as annoying, Paul tells Timothy that it has the capacity to destroy. The second half of v14 says **"and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins hearers."**

Timothy is to not get sucked into these debates and he's to charge others to not participate as well. This is serious enough that Timothy is to invoke the name of God in his charge. They are a waste of time. If our words are spent more on petty debates and arguing against meaningless speculation, we'll spend less on declaring the Good News of Jesus. And the result of that isn't just wasting time, it's causes a catastrophe in those who participate.

I did some deep research this week. The original Greek for the word "quarrel" is literally translated "social media thread!" Never in my life have I looked at Facebook and read, "Wow. Thank you. By insulting me, demeaning my ideas, and condescendingly presenting your own views, you have convinced me of your position."

Quarreling is steeped in pride, and its participants are more interested in their own victory than the victory of God's truth. Rightly handling the Word of God seeks to build up others. Debate seeks to tear down. And if we're not diligent, and we jump into these things, we'll spend more time worrying about winning an argument than we will winning souls for Christ. An approved worker stays away from that stuff and stay focused on the truth.

An approved worker shuns deviation from the truth. V16 says ¹⁶ **But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness.** The challenge Timothy faced went beyond petty arguments that were a waste of time. It also included false teaching. Irreverent babble is godless chatter, teaching opposed to the Word of God. And just like quarreling has destructive ends, so too does false teaching. Anything we consume causes us to grow, or to progress, in a certain direction. There is no neutral. We can't help but be impacted. If we eat good food, we progress in health. If we eat bad food, we progress in unhealth. As we dig into God's good and true Word and apply it to our lives, we grow in godliness. But if we participate in and consume that which conflicts with the Word of God, we, in fact, progress in the wrong direction and grow in ungodliness.

Another concern with this babble is that it is often very popular and spreads to others. That's because so much of it appeals to and indulges our appetites and desires. Paul uses the graphic illustration beginning in V17: **"and their talk will spread like gangrene."** Gangrene is dead tissue that infects and kills healthy tissue with which it comes into contact. And gangrene doesn't need a lot of help to spread. It's just going to go if not opposed. Irreverent babble acts in the same way. It is dead talk that spreads dead ideas in the body, infecting those who consume it, and the result is deadly. There's only one way to treat gangrene, and that's to amputate it, to cut it out. The approved worker treats the disease of gangrene with the straight-cutting scalpel called

the Word of God.

Paul then gives an example of how it spreads by telling of two false teachers and the impact of their teaching. V17 **“¹⁷ and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, ¹⁸ who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.**

Isn't it interesting how Paul describes what has happened to them. While an approved worker is one who rightly handles, or cuts straight, the word of truth, an irreverent babbler swerves or strays or wanders away from the straight path in their beliefs. Their teaching has swerved from the truth, spread like gangrene, and it is upsetting, overturning, the faith of some.

And here's why an approved worker needs to be diligent about this, both for ourselves and for those around us. Hymenaeus and Philetus likely didn't start out saying the resurrection had already happened. They were a part of the church in Ephesus, heard Paul's teaching, and probably read his letter. But Ephesus was a culture highly influenced by Greek philosophy. To the Greeks, the body was evil and the soul was good. And as they entertained that philosophy, as they consumed it, participating in irreverent babble, it started to take hold and change what they believed. And over time, they ultimately came to a conclusion that deviated from the truth and rejected the faith.

Deviation from the truth, heresy, usually includes some truth. These guys believed in a resurrection, which is a fundamental aspect of the Gospel. But they swerved from the truth when they believed it was only spiritual and not also physical. Their message was a deadly mixture of the Word of God and some external fallacy that, when combined, turned people from the faith.

We are not immune from that same thing happening to us. In 1 Timothy, Paul says these ideas are “falsely called knowledge.” They are not all some half-baked, whacky, crazy talk that can be easily dismissed. They are presented as viable views, as knowledge. We have to recognize that the culture and beliefs of the world are knocking at the door of our church, eager to compete against the message of the Gospel. A couple examples:

It's true that God wants us to be faithful. It's true he wants to give good gifts to his children. But when we start to entertain and believe the world's message that God's number one goal is for us to be happy, we swerve from the truth and believe the more faith we have, the more stuff we'll have. 37% of evangelicals believe God will always reward true faith with material blessings.

It's true that God is love, that he loves everyone and desires all people be saved and come to the knowledge of truth, but when we start to entertain and believe the world's message that a loving God couldn't possibly hold his creation accountable and that it's bad to judge, we swerve from the truth and believe he sets aside his holiness and justice and accepts everyone, no matter what they think of Jesus. 64% of evangelicals believe Heaven is a place where all people will ultimately be reunited with their loved ones.

Those are alarming stats, but they are in no way hopeless. God has given us the truth. It's on us, as an approved worker, to “go with haste” in learning what it says. And, as a pastor and leader in

this church, it's on us to help everyone here with that learning.

Now, all this talk of quarreling and false teaching leading to ruin, ungodliness, and people turning from the faith may leave us discouraged or fearful about the future of the church and about our own susceptibility of being misled. Paul seems to anticipate Timothy struggling with that, and he includes a word of encouragement I want to close with. **An approved worker stands confident on God's foundation of truth.** V19 says ¹⁹ **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."**

God's firm foundation is the church, and the seal upon it is the seal of God. It is a mark that indicates God's ownership and approval. The church is being built by the Word, who is Jesus, on the Word, which is the Bible. It is a pillar and buttress of truth. We do not need to fear about the destiny of the church because, if the gates of hell can't prevail against it, the teaching of heretics don't stand a chance.

God knows who is truly part of the church. **"The Lord knows those who are his"** is a reference to an episode in the book of Numbers where Korah rebels against Moses and God intervenes by separating and caring for those who are true from those who are false. This is a heart issue, so it's God's business to deal with. We don't need to run around here and try to figure out where people stand. It's not anything we need to worry about. We just need to trust that he's got it, and trust he's got us.

Our part is to live a life that reflects our devotion to God and his ownership of us. The inward change that God alone is responsible for and God alone sees should manifest itself into a life that aligns with his Word and pleases him. We are to leave behind wickedness, avoid the contamination of the world and its false teachers, and diligently pursue him and his truth, living a life as one approved.