

Avoid Tiresome Nitpickers!

II Timothy 2:14-21

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

“My gracious Redeemer, my Savior art Thou; if ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, t’is now.”

Turn with me to II Timothy, and we are in the second chapter. As we have been expounding the Pastoral Epistles in these last few months, we come this morning to chapter two of II Timothy at verse 14, and we’ll be reading through to the end of verse 21. Before we read the passage together, let us pray.

Gracious God and ever blessed Father, again as we bow in Your presence, we acknowledge that we are a needy people. We are prone to wander, and we ask now for the help of Your Spirit, that we might rightly divide the word of truth, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Hear with me the word of God.

Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth. But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and thus they upset the faith of some. Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let every one who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness." Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.

Amen, and may God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Now, as we have been discovering afresh in recent weeks, II Timothy is a deeply significant letter because it is preparing the church for that period of time when

the apostles would be no more. How would the church, and in particular, Timothy, as a relatively young man...how would the church survive without the direct teaching and influence and advice and letter-writing of men like Paul and Peter, and John?

Paul is in prison. He speaks in chapter one, verse 16, of being in chains. He's in Rome. He's in the Marmatine Prison—a hole in the ground underneath the city of Rome, described in one place “...with a hole in the roof to let in some light and air.” He would have been let down into this hole. This isn't the imprisonment that is spoken of at the end of the Acts of the Apostles in chapter 28. From that imprisonment in Rome, more like a house arrest, he was in fact released and we know from his letters that he went to many different places: to Crete and Ephesus, and Colossae and Macedonia, where he visited Philippi...probably went from there to Spain. Tradition says he went to Great Britain (don't hold much to it, but tradition says that!), then he returns to Ephesus and to Miletus, to Troas (where he had first set sail on his missionary journey). He is arrested, and eventually ends up here in Rome.

It's about 66, 67 A.D. It's about four years after the period of imprisonment spoken of at the end of The Acts of the Apostles. Onesiphorus has searched in all the Roman prisons and eventually found the Apostle Paul. He knows he's going to die. And Paul is...according to tradition, he will be taken out of this prison along the Ostian Way, three or four miles outside the city of Rome where, because he's a Roman citizen he won't be crucified, but he will be beheaded. Tradition has it that Peter was killed along with the Apostle Paul, though of course he's not at this moment, anyway, in the same prison as the Apostle Paul.

Paul's writing to Timothy: a young man, his successor. He's writing to him about the future, about life without the apostolate: what sort of things are going to come upon the church, what sort of things Timothy needs to know, what dangers are about you. It's like you do when you speak to your girls, boys, who are about to go off to college. They're about to leave home, and you have a list of 486 things they need to know, and especially the first 400. And you want them to know these things because life is hard, and life is difficult, and there are things that may come upon them that they've never experienced before. And Paul is saying something like that now to Timothy, a rather frail, timid young man.

He's telling him the hard things, the hard truths. He's already urged Timothy in the first verse of chapter two to be strong...to be strong in the grace that is in the Lord Jesus Christ; and now it seems as though Paul, having warned Timothy of possible persecution and suffering that lies ahead for him and the church, he now wants Timothy to be cognizant of the fact that in the future heresy will come. False teaching will come. And false teaching will come, as it always comes, through particular individuals, and very often these individuals are within the church and not outside of the church. And Paul says something positive and he says something negative—and let's end with the positive.

I. What's the negative thing that the Apostle Paul says?

Well, you see it there in verse 14. He says, "Remind them...not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to the ruin of the hearers." He says something similar in verse 16: "...avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness...." And if you cast your eyes down to verse 23, Paul isn't finished: "...Refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels."

There are certain individuals (Paul is saying to Timothy) [whose] only interest in Christianity is in the teachings of people who fight and who quarrel: tiresome nitpickers.

Now, don't misunderstand the Apostle Paul. Paul isn't saying you shouldn't fight about words, period. The Bible contains two million words, every single one of them "given by inspiration of God and profitable for doctrine and reproof and correction and instruction in the way of righteousness, that the man of God might be thoroughly furnished unto every good work." You and I fight about the words of the Bible, but that's not what Paul is talking about here. There are important words: words like *justification*; words like *propitiation*; words like *sanctification*; words like *fellowship*; words like *covenant*; words like *heaven* and *hell*, and *gospel* and *Jesus* and *Christ*, and *church*, and *Lord's Supper* and *breaking of bread*. There are words...God's words, breathed out by God.

But there's a way of talking about words and of arguing about words that actually doesn't edify, that doesn't in the end promote godliness. Paul is thinking about people who write anonymous letters to newspapers! People ask questions and they're not interested in the answer—they simply want you to hear how clever they are!

I was hearing this week of a former student of Cornelius van Til. He was describing what classes in Westminster Seminary in the 1950's and '60's was like with the great Cornelius van Til—philosopher, apologist—had so much influence over so many ministers in the Presbyterian Church in America (even if you disagree with him, as I sometimes do!). A student is asking a question in class, and the question goes on and on and on, and van Til lies down on the desk in front of him and begins to snore—saying to the student, "Your question is way above your intelligence!" Paul is warning Timothy about people like that.

It's interesting, isn't it, that C. S. Lewis in his *Screwtape Letters*, in the very first letter of the older Screwtape to the younger Wormwood—"...your man has been accustomed ever since he was a boy to have a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. He doesn't think of doctrines as primarily true or false, but as academic or practical. Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the church." Satan knows how to get folk to quarrel about

words that have no meaning. If every opinion is regarded as equally valid, as Postmodernism says, then words have no meaning! If religion is merely a private matter which may or may not have anything to do with a person's character and life, then you will always get friction within the church.

I heard a man say recently, "I do a lot of things that are wrong—you know, a lot of stuff sexually—I'm really into it. But, you know, I believe it's all taken care of on Calvary." Malicious words. Malicious words. Hymenaeus and Philetus...isn't it interesting Paul would actually name them?...Hymenaeus and Philetus, teaching some kind of view that the resurrection had already taken place (in some kind of quasi-spiritual sense, no doubt).

It's like a gangrene that begins in your toes, in your foot, spreads up your leg. It's a poison: avoid it! It's possible to stray from the truth, as Paul is warning Timothy. It starts by being quarrelsome about peripheral things, things that don't matter. Then what happens? These people, they stop attending church. They begin to attend only one service, and then only once a month, and then only once every four or five months, and then only once a year at Easter. They never come to a prayer meeting where, if they were asked to pray, their souls would be exposed. They see themselves as the great defenders of the faith, but they're merely defending themselves. Demas wandered from the truth; Diatrophes wandered from the truth; Hymenaeus and Philetus wandered from the truth. Beware of them...beware of them!

People who once sat in these pews, people who broke bread at this table, people who sang these great hymns, who said "...if ever I loved thee, my Jesus, t'is now"—and where are they now? They've gone. They've fallen in love with the world. They attended seminaries and no longer profess the name of Jesus. They've quarreled about words, and sold their books two years after leaving seminary. Intellectual pressures and political ambitions, and firm young flesh and financial success, and the promises of the world—and they're gone! Beware of them! What a solemn word that is.

I wish I hadn't to bring that to you this morning: you don't know how much I wish I didn't have to bring that to you this morning, but that's Paul's dying word to Timothy: "Beware", because it's possible to stray from the truth, and it begins not by being, as it were, indifferent to words; it sometimes begins by quarreling about words but not seeing the godly intent of words.

II. Well, a positive thing.

And he says it in verse 15 and he expounds on it later: "Be diligent to present yourself to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth."

Oh! Several things! Lots of things! I haven't time to say most of them, but let me say three things, just very quickly—three positive things that Paul is saying to Timothy, as to the manner of what he does, as to the method of what he does, as to the matter of what he does.

As to the manner of what he does, Paul is saying to Timothy, 'Do your work, your work for the kingdom of God, your work for Jesus; and do it in such a way that when you present yourself before God (as each one of us will present ourselves before God)...do it in such a way that you can come with a clear conscience. He's not saying that you do a perfect work; he's not saying that we don't make errors in the work. He's saying do it with a good conscience, do it as unto the Lord, so that you can come before God and say, 'Lord, I know this isn't perfect; I know I've failed you in a thousand ways, but here it is, and I've done it for You. And my motivation and my intent was to do it as unto You. Do your work like that. Have before you an accountability before God. That's what Paul is saying to Timothy.

As to the method of what he does, he is to accurately handle the word of truth. Some of you will remember the King James Version, as it's the one in my head, "...rightly dividing the word of truth", and that difference reflects a dispute, and it's almost like the dispute that Paul is actually talking about, about fighting about words to no profit. There's a long dispute, and it's still going on as to what the meaning of this word actually is. Is it an agricultural metaphor?

I grew up on a farm in west Wales, and I remember trying to plow with a horse. Now, all you "townies" don't know what I'm talking about, but you agricultural folk will know what I'm talking about...trying to plow. I was little at the time, I was either six or seven. The horse died when I was seven...sad story...won't go into it...but I was six. This horse was enormous, and I remember walking along the field trying to hold this iron plow and then looking back and seeing this wavy line.....And is Paul saying, as John Chrysostom of the fourth century began to say, and people are still saying it to this day, "plowing a straight furrow through the word of God"? So that you're not going to the left and you're not going to the right: you're going straight down the middle. Is that what it means?

Or is this coming from the Roman arena? You what know what the Romans were famous for: straight roads—building straight roads from "A" to "B". And is that the idea that lies behind this word?

Well, whatever it is, it's clear. It's clear that what Paul wants us to see is that the underlying idea is that we're not to get sidetracked. We're not to get sidetracked on useless and unimportant things; that we're to hold up the main things, and to rightly interpret the Bible with a view to seeing the whole of the Bible as the word of God.

And then, as to the matter of what he does, you notice he says, "...accurately handling [or rightly dividing] the word of truth." And what is the word of truth,

exactly? And there are those who say, well, of course it's the Bible. It's the sixty-six books, from Genesis to Revelation; it's the two million words that God has inspired by the Holy Spirit, words which are true. Rightly divide the Bible.

Then there are those who, because of the context (haven't time to go into it this morning)—but there are those who suggest, 'No, it's not exactly the Bible. It's the gospel itself. It's the word of truth which is the gospel.' Now, you can't pit one against the other. The Bible is about the gospel, and the gospel is in the Bible.

Isn't it interesting, if it is the latter—as many modern commentators seem to think that it is—isn't it interesting that one of the concerns of the Apostle Paul just before he dies is to say to Timothy, 'Make sure you preach and defend and proclaim accurately the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Make sure that you're always proclaiming the glory of God, the sinfulness of man, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the gratitude that should be ours for grace bestowed. Make sure that you don't fall into the trap of subtly suggesting that something that we do or some ritual that we engage in somehow merits our salvation; somehow adds to the finished work of Jesus Christ. Be clear about that. Be always clear about the word of truth.'

So that as we come this morning to the Lord's table, "...nothing in my hands I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling. Naked, come to Thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace. Foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die." Our only hope in life and in death is Jesus and what He has done on our behalf, and that seems to be what was at the very heart of the Apostle Paul to Timothy before he died.

Let's sing together, shall we, from hymn No. 427, *Amidst Us Our Beloved Stands*.

The Lord's Supper

Be seated. As we come now to the Lord's table, let us attend to the words of institution of this blessed sacrament spoken by our Lord, and given by the Apostle Paul:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks

judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly.

Well, those are very familiar words, and they're also very solemn words. Paul is saying to us here that if we're not believers, then we're not to come to the Lord's table. If you're not a believer, come to Jesus. Come to Jesus Christ and confess your sin and your need and your guilt; and Jesus said, "I will never cast you out."

The Lord's Supper are signs are seals of the covenant of grace. The bread and the wine, they picture for us the broken body of Jesus, that body of Jesus given unto death; that body hanging upon a cross, that body like our body. "We do not have an high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in every point tempted like as we are." As we come to the table this morning with burdens and troubles and difficulties, we come knowing that One has gone before us, the Pioneer of our salvation, the Trailblazer, the One who now sits at God's right hand in glory.

We come asking God's Spirit to strengthen us and enable us for the fight, for the battle, for the pilgrimage that lies ahead. We come with gratitude. We come with thankfulness; we come with a song in our hearts in praise of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We come seeing this as but a token for now, until He comes. And so as we participate at the Lord's Supper this morning, we are mindful that this is just something to last in this life, and then He will come again, and then we shall be in glory—body and soul, forever and ever. And we shall sit down at the marriage supper of the Lamb: oh, I daresay far more grand in one sense than what's before us this morning.

We come as sinners. We come as those who have broken God's law. And dear Christian, this morning your heart condemns you, remember the table is for sinners like you and me. We don't come because we're perfect; we don't come because we've attained some peak of holiness and sanctification; we come with empty hands, and we thank Him for a Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for me.

I'm going to ask Brister to lead us now in prayer

[The Reverend Brister Ware]: *Our Father, we come to consecrate ourselves and thoroughly prepare our hearts for the sacrament. Thou hast instructed us to examine ourselves, to look within, and painfully we acknowledge our sinfulness. Not just our general sinfulness, but we acknowledge the specific besetting sins that we have not rooted out, that we have not fought tooth and nail against, that we have not resisted unto blood. And we acknowledge our unworthiness and pray Thou will strengthen us and build us up in sanctification that we may more and more die unto sin and live unto righteousness. Comfort us with this sacrament, Lord. We know Thou dost enter into us and art mystically bound up with our nerves and fibers and sinews in some mysterious, glorious way, and we thank Thee for this and pray Thou will receive honor and glory, and that we might*

be nourished. For Christ's sake. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed is found in our hymnbooks on the inside front cover. Would you join with me:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the
Holy Ghost,
Born of the virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead
and buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day He arose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand
Of God the Father Almighty.
From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost,
The holy catholic church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.
Amen.

Also join in *The Ten Commandments*, which are on the back of our bulletin.

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol. You shall not worship them or serve them.
3. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet.

[Dr. Thomas]: On the night in which He was betrayed, Jesus took bread and broke it and said, "This is My body which is for you. Take, eat. This do in remembrance of Me."

[Served to congregation.]

Likewise, after supper, Jesus took a cup and said, "This cup is My blood, shed for many for remission of sins. Drink ye all of it."

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