

Rightly Handling the Word of Truth

2 Timothy 2:14-19

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on 8/14/2011

Introduction

- ❖ Evaluation is important. Accountability makes a difference. Think about it: If your boss was no longer going to evaluate your work, if no one was keeping you accountable, how careful and meticulous would you be in your work? Would you cut corners? Maybe. Would you check and re-check your results to make sure you got it exactly right? Probably not.
 - Students, if your teacher told you that your homework assignments will no longer be evaluated. You just have to turn them in. How many of you would carefully and meticulously complete them? How many would procrastinate until the last minute, scribble some words or numbers on a piece of paper and just turn it in?

- ❖ But because your boss does evaluate your work, because your teacher does keep you accountable, you're motivated to rightly handle the project or assignment you've been given. You're careful to do a good job, knowing you have to give an account for your work.
 - Now some of us are still careless and inattentive. But on the day we have to give an account, we know have no excuse but to be ashamed of our work.

- ❖ Well Scripture clearly teaches that every one of us will be evaluated by God. One day, we will all give an account for every word spoken and deed done. We see this idea communicated in this morning's passage, in v15. The Apostle Paul is telling his disciple Timothy to "*do your best to present yourself to God as one approved*".
 - That means one day Timothy will have to stand before God to give an account of his life and doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16). And the hope is to be approved. To be deemed qualified, or as Paul puts it "*a worker who has no need to be ashamed*".

- ❖ And why would he not be ashamed? Because in his life and ministry as pastor of this church in Ephesus, Timothy is "*rightly handling the word of truth*".
 - Now this is set in contrast to false teachers who are spreading falsehood and heresy. Paul describes them later on in chapter 3:8 as men who "*oppose the truth*", men who are "*disqualified regarding the faith*". In other words, they stand before God as disapproved. They should be ashamed of their work because they are wrongly handling the word of truth.

- ❖ So this passage is specifically applicable to Christian teachers like Timothy. Whether you're a parent responsible for teaching your children, or you teach Sunday School, or teach in small group, or you disciple others in the Lord and in his Word, in whatever context, you are responsible for rightly handling the word of truth.

- ❖ Remember the words from James 3:1, "*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*" In other words, be sobered by the reality that one day you will have to give an account for every word that you teach. That alone should strike a holy fear in our hearts and motivate us to rightly handle God's word.

- But even for those of you who don't have a formal teaching responsibility at home or in the church, remember that every Christian is a teacher, to one degree or another, because every Christian is expected to explain their hope in Christ to others. So that means we will all have to give an account for how we handled the word of God.
- ❖ Friends, if an annual review from your supervisor is enough to sober you into checking and re-checking your work, if a midterm is enough to motivate you to study, then how much more sobering and motivating is the idea that the God of the Universe is going to evaluate every word you teach and deem you either approved or disapproved?

Handle it Right by Giving it Straight

- ❖ I have three points for us this morning. The first is found in vv14-15. It goes like this: Because one day we will have to stand before God to give an account for every word spoken
 - 1) **Rightly handle the word of truth by giving it straight.** Let's read v14 again, "*Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.*"
 - If you recall, Paul had just reminded Timothy, in vv11-13, of a faithful saying that highlights the need for endurance and offers a warning against denying Christ in the face of suffering and persecution. These are the '*things*' that Timothy is to remind the believers in Ephesus.
- ❖ Remind them that the work of the Gospel is a battle. Remind them to share in suffering as good soldiers of Christ Jesus (2:3). And as you remind them of these realities, Timothy, I want you to "*charge them before God not to quarrel about words*". Christians have enough opposition in the world, so there is no point in opposing one another in quarrels about words.
- ❖ *Now what does Paul mean by that phrase?* Some take it to mean arguing over semantics and insignificant details. They picture medieval scholars in ivory towers splitting hairs over the silliest of things, arguing about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Read that way, we are not to engage in pointless debates, especially since we have such important and dangerous work for the Gospel before us.
 - But I think Paul meant something far more serious than just getting wrapped up in hair-splitting arguments. That certainly does no one any good, but it doesn't necessarily lead to your ruin. It's just a waste of time.
 - But the Greek word for 'ruin' used there is *katastrophe*, which is where we get the word 'catastrophe'. So we're talking about a quarreling about words that actually harms the spiritual health of hearers. It's a catastrophe for their faith.
- ❖ I think it helps to read v14 in contrast to chapter 1:13 where Timothy is told to follow the pattern of the sound words (sound doctrine) that he learned. So v14 means that instead of *quarreling* about sound words like the false teachers, the faithful in Christ are to *follow* the pattern of sound words like Timothy.

- ❖ So the battle is *not* over semantics and petty details. The battle is over the meaning and significance of the very words that are central to the Christian message. It's over the Gospel. These false teachers like to spend their time quarreling about these words, challenging and criticizing them.
 - In contrast, we are to spend our time rightly handling these words. Read v15, "*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.*"

- ❖ That phrase '*rightly handle*' literally means 'to cut straight'. So Timothy is to do his best (lit. be zealous) to be an unashamed worker who cuts straight the word of truth. The imagery is of a road or path being cut straight through a forested countryside that is difficult to pass through. By cutting a path straight through, travelers can then reach the other side.
 - In the same way, Timothy is to first get things straight himself by following the pattern of sound words from Paul, and then he is to give it straight, especially to faithful men who are able to teach others also (2:2).

- ❖ Friends, the goal of good Christian teaching is to give it straight, to cut a straight and clear path through Scripture that helps your hearers reach the other side of a biblical text without straying into wrong interpretation and bad theology.
 - My pastor in Vancouver would always say that the best sermons are lasers and not floodlights. Floodlight sermons are the kind that shine biblical light all over the place. Everything said maybe truthful but nothing is clear. Please go home confused.
 - But a laser sermon is the kind that is accurate and faithful to the main point of the text. It's the kind that is clear and straightforward. Hearers can go home and re-read the exact same passage and see for themselves a clear path cut through to the other side.

- ❖ I still have a ways to grow, but every time I preach, I want it to be a laser. Friends, I encourage you to do likewise and make it your goal - every time you have to explain the Word of God to someone - to give them a laser. Give them a clear explanation that is accurate and faithful to the main point of the text.
 - In so doing, you will have confidence on the day you present yourself to God. You will have no reason to be ashamed for you rightly handled the word of truth. You gave it straight.

- ❖ Now perhaps for some of you, before you feel confident to give it straight, you need to get it straight. As I've challenged you before, perhaps you need to take the time to learn the doctrines that are central to the Gospel. Find yourself a more seasoned believer that you respect and ask him/her to disciple you in these truths.
 - Or some of you may just need a refresher course to make sure you've got it straight, so we're offering a Sunday School class in the Fall on the foundational doctrines of the faith. Come get it straight so you can give it straight.

Avoid the Babble of Those Who Give it Crooked

- ❖ Our second point comes from vv16-18. It goes like this: Because we will have to give an account before God **2) Avoid the ungodly, infectious babble of those who give it crooked.** Read vv16-18, *“But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. 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.”*
 - So as we do our best to give the word of truth straight, we have to watch out for those who give it crooked. Paul calls their teaching ‘*irreverent babble*’. Now, again, it appears as if they’re just teaching trivial things that are a waste of time.
 - But contextually, this babble is related to the quarreling over sound doctrine that Paul warned about in v14. Timothy is to avoid such babble himself and to prohibit it among the congregation.

- ❖ You see, if Timothy were to allow debate over the central doctrines of the Gospel to continue, if he were to allow the congregation to quarrel about these sound words, that would simply encourage the false teachers to chime in and say things that could further upset the faith of some and cause a catastrophe.
 - It was already happening in the case of Hymenaeus and Philetus, who were saying the resurrection already happened. See, they weren’t spreading insignificant babble. Their babble concerned Gospel matters and was extremely harmful.

- ❖ Paul gives two reasons to avoid this kind of babble. The first is because of the effect it has on those who engage in it. Look at v16, *“for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness.”* There is actually a bit of sarcasm in that statement. That word ‘lead’ literally means ‘to progress or advance’.
 - So those who engage in irreverent babble think they’re progressing in godliness. They spend so much time picking apart the faith once for all delivered to the saints, deconstructing it, debating it, and all the while think they’re growing in godliness. But in fact they are regressing further into ungodliness.

- ❖ The second reason to avoid irreverent babble is because of the effect it has on others in the church body. Look at v17, *“and their talk will spread like gangrene.”* Gangrene is the medical condition where bodily tissue decays because of obstructed circulation or infection, and it can spread if left untreated.
 - The word ‘spread’ used here literally means ‘to have pasture’. The image is of a disease spreading throughout the body in the same way animals spread across the land looking for pasture. Likewise, irreverent babble has a way of spreading throughout the church body and upsetting faith.

- ❖ A good example of ungodly, infectious babble coming from the mouth of a shameful teacher can be found in Acts 13. Paul and Barnabas had arrived on the island of Cyprus when summoned by the Roman proconsul, a Gentile, who sought to hear the Word of God. But a

certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus (also known as Elymas) was an advisor to the proconsul, whose advice would be considered ungodly, infectious babble.

- Let me read Acts 13:8-10, *“But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?”*

- ❖ That is what happens when you wrongly handle the word of truth. You turn people away from the faith. Bad doctrine takes the straight paths of the Lord and makes them crooked. Instead of getting it and giving it straight. They get it crooked and give it crooked.

- ❖ Hymenaeus and Philetus are another example. Now Paul had already mentioned Hymenaeus in 1 Timothy 1:20, as one who had made shipwreck of his faith. Paul had already put him out of the church, but apparently he still had some influence over the congregation.
 - He and Philetus (who is not mentioned elsewhere) had swerved from the straight path of the truth, saying that the resurrection had already happened. That is not a reference to Christ’s resurrection but to the core belief in the Christian faith of a future, decisive event when everyone who ever lived will be raised bodily to stand before God to give an account for their bodily conduct in this life (1 Cor. 15:12; Heb 9:27).

- ❖ Apparently these two men were interpreting the resurrection from the dead as a spiritual event that occurs in your soul. They were probably influenced by Gnostic teaching that promoted a low view of the material world and thus the human body, so the idea of being reunited with a body at the resurrection didn’t appeal to them.
 - But by denying a future bodily resurrection, by saying it already took place spiritually, you are in a sense denying that future judgment where you will have to stand before God and give an account for what you did in the body.

- ❖ So this kind of bad doctrine is really just a form of self-justification designed to relieve your guilty conscience and empower you to continue sinning in the body. That explains why Paul says this kind of babble leads people into more and more ungodliness - because it gives them license to sin.
 - And what is worse, your belief, or lack thereof, regarding a future bodily resurrection affects how you view Jesus’ resurrection, which affects your future hope of salvation. That was Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 15 when he addressed a similar heresy. That is how this kind of babble was upsetting the faith of some.

- ❖ *Friends, are you aware of the irreverent babble that is currently going on in evangelical circles?* I’m not talking about bad theology being tossed around in the corners of evangelicalism. I’m talking about bad theology that is taking center stage, showing up in popular books and coming out of the mouths of popular preachers and speakers.

- Many of the sound doctrines central to the Gospel - entrusted to the apostles and passed down to the faithful in Christ over thousands of generations - is now the subject of debate among modern-day believers.
 - Christians are quarreling over the doctrine of hell, over the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation, over the cross and what Jesus actually accomplished, and over the inspiration of Scripture.
- ❖ Instead of receiving the faith once for all delivered to the saints and faithfully passing it on, some want to debate these central doctrines thinking they're doing the Church a service, but in reality they're making crooked the straight paths of the Lord.
 - Don't get me wrong. I'm not against having theological discussions or entertaining tough questions that challenge our convictions. There are going to be legitimate theological disagreements between Christians because there are some issues that are just not clear in Scripture.
- ❖ But Paul's point is that there are certain truths central to the Christian faith, like the resurrection from the dead, that have been passed down to you from the apostles and are clearly discernible in Scripture. And our job is get them straight and give them straight.
 - Our job is *not* to quarrel over these foundational truths that we received, as if we're trying to reinvent the theological wheel. We are to *follow* the pattern of sound words we received. Not debate them.
- ❖ So it is in this context that Paul is charging us to avoid any babble that tries to interject doubt and uncertainty into these core issues and thus upset the faith of some, creating a catastrophe.

Put Your Hope in the Firmness of God's Foundation

- ❖ Our third point is in v19 and it goes like this: Because you will have to give an account before God **3) Put your hope in the firmness of God's foundation.** Look at v19, "*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."*"
 - This was an important verse to include because just in case Timothy or the Ephesians were getting discouraged by the increase and persistence of false teaching or perhaps they were disheartened by what happened to Hymenaeus and Philetus as well as Phygelus and Hermogenes (1:15), Paul wrote v19 to turn their attention away from the flimsiness of man's faith and towards the firmness of God's foundation.
- ❖ The NIV actually begins v19 with 'nevertheless' and I think that makes the contrast easier to see. Yes, false teaching is spreading like gangrene and upsetting the faith of some. *Nevertheless*, God's firm foundation stands.
 - Contextually, the firm foundation is referring to the Church, the people of God. Earlier in v10 Paul called them 'the elect', those chosen for salvation in Christ.

- ❖ His point is that even though some are deserting the faith and denying the Lord and spreading false doctrine, we don't have to fear a mass 'falling away' from Christ is imminent. Why? Because the foundation of God is firm. The true Church that God is building cannot be shaken. We, his people, are sealed and secured by his Word.
 - Seals were used in ancient times as a mark of ownership. Paul used this imagery in other letters, calling the gift of the Holy Spirit God's seal upon individual believers (Eph. 1:13; 2 Cor. 1:22). The Spirit dwells in us, setting us apart as belonging to God. Because of this seal, we can be secure as his children.
 - In the same way, the seal in v19 that bears these two OT verses is what guarantees and secures our place as members of the true church, as bricks in his firm foundation.

- ❖ Both verses come from Numbers chapter 16, from the episode of Korah's rebellion, which took place during Israel's 40 years in the wilderness. If you recall, Korah the Levite led a band of some 250 other leaders to oppose Moses and Aaron's leadership in an effort to take over the priesthood.
 - Amazingly, Moses did not try to defend himself. Instead he told them to come back in the morning and present yourselves before the tabernacle and let the Lord decide who should lead his people.
 - And if you recall, the next morning, Moses tells the congregation to depart from the tents of these wicked men and then God causes the ground to open up and literally swallow them, along with all their possessions.

- ❖ So the phrase, "*The Lord knows those who are his*", which comes from Numbers 16:5, should be read in the context of a congregation that has been infiltrated by wicked men. And just as the episode with Korah did not overturn or destroy the entire congregation of Israel. In the same way, false teachers and their babble will not overturn or destroy the congregation at Ephesus.
 - Because God can discern between true and false believers, we can be sure that his Church of true believers will stand firm and secure.

- ❖ And thankfully, we can know whether or not *we* are true believers, whether we are part of the firm foundation, by considering the second phrase, "*Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity*", which comes from Numbers 16:26.
 - So in that episode, the Lord identified the true believers by calling them to separate from the rebellious. In the same way, true believers are identified by their separating from false teachers and avoiding their ungodly and infectious babble. That is evidence of their salvation.

- ❖ Now let me be clear. No one is saved by avoiding bad theology. And no one is saved because they have good theology, because they rightly handle the word of truth. That's important, but that doesn't save you. No, people are saved by the grace of God, which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus.

- Jesus saves by dying a sin-atoning death on the cross, which abolished death and brought life and immortality to all who place their trust in him, to all who name the name of Jesus as their Savior (1:10). That's how you're saved.
- ❖ But those who have experienced saving grace will manifest the reality of their salvation by departing from iniquity. That's Paul's point.
 - Those who have been transformed by Jesus' grace will be the kind of people who are zealous to guard the good deposit entrusted to them, zealous to follow the pattern of sound words they were taught, zealous to rightly handle the word of truth.
 - And they will be the kind of people who depart from iniquity and the bad theology that leads to greater ungodliness.
- ❖ Paul later writes in chapter 3 that evil people and impostors - that is, false believers and false teachers - will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived (3:13). But in spite of the flimsiness of man's faith, we can rest our hope in the firmness of God's foundation. We can be confident that his true Church will withstand any storm.
- ❖ Friends, my hope and prayer is for us as a congregation to become more theologically aware and astute, to be better trained in sound doctrine. The goal is not to puff up our knowledge but to serve the cause of Christ and to advance his Gospel.
 - I want us to get it straight so we can give it straight, so we can clearly, precisely, faithfully communicate and explain the central truths of the faith to others. And in so doing, we'll be better equipped to identify false teaching, to smell out bad doctrine that can rot and eat away at the life of the church.
 - I pray we become a people who have no need to be ashamed on the day God calls us to account because we've rightly handled his word. Let us pray now to this very end.