

Teach the Truth

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[0 : 01] Well, good evening again. If you've got a Bible near you, if you could turn to 2 Timothy chapter 2, we'll be looking at the passage that we read together earlier from verse 14 onwards. I must start tonight with a confession. When the first version of the preaching rota was issued, the passage I was assigned was from the middle of 1 Peter. And to be honest, it looked quite interesting. I had some issues there that would be, I guess, quite fun to grapple with, to try and work out how they applied to us today. And then the preaching plan was changed. And I was given this passage. And I must admit, my initial reaction was not excitement. Because you see, obviously, we know that all Scripture is God-breathed, useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. But what really is the relevance of a passage about teaching the words correctly and avoiding false teaching in a good evangelical church like this, where the Bible is faithfully preached week in, week out. However, news I received a couple of weeks ago came as a real shock and convinced me of the real and present danger we live in. And of the vital importance and urgency of this teaching. You see, I received news of a friend. A friend I've known as a Christian for well over 10 years. A friend who knew his Bible inside out. Who devoured online sermons. Who was that person that always, when you went out for a meal, prayed embarrassingly long and loud prayers. And this friend had renounced his faith.

For reasons I've still to properly understand, he's decided that what was once so important to him, he now wants nothing to do with. And as I thought about it longer, I thought of others.

For others, people I've known, some who sat in the seats here, who at one point seemed to be living for Christ, and are now far away. For some, they've been unwilling to accept things that the Bible teaches.

For others, they've been unable to reconcile the lifestyle they want with walking with Christ. But for whatever reason, they have gone.

And as I thought about it even more, I realized I could even think of a couple of teachers that some of us watched on video in this very room.

[3 : 20] One whose questioning of everything has led him to a place so far from the center of the gospel.

So far that it can't really be recognized as the gospel at all. And another who, while still probably orthodox in his beliefs, his personal failings have brought the church he founded collapsing in a heap around him.

And so all this goes to show that there's absolutely no room for complacency. There's no room for us to think that we here at Bruntsfield Evangelical Church are somehow immune.

Or that any of the teachers we respect and learn from, whether in books, whether online, or whether on this very platform here, are incapable of falling.

Several times recently I've heard references to one particular scene at the Last Supper. When Jesus has just revealed to his disciples that one of them will betray him.

[4 : 33] And each of them, one after the other, says, Is it I, Lord? Each of them recognizes that somehow inside them there is that weakness, that doubt, that rebellious nature, that means that it isn't inconceivable that it could be them.

But there's another scene that comes to mind. Jesus has been teaching his disciples, and they've been finding the teaching hard. And many of them have been turning away.

And Jesus says to them, You do not want to leave too, do you? And Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go?

You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God. So hopefully, as we dig into this passage, that serves as a bit of an explanation as to why I believe this short passage in a letter written to Timothy all those years ago is vital and urgent to us today.

Because you see, in verse 14, we read that Paul exhorts Timothy to keep reminding God's people of these things.

[6 : 15] They don't need to hear anything new. Nothing novel, nothing radical. They know this already. They've heard it from Paul, from Timothy, many times.

But like us, they forget. They're drawn away so easily. And there are all sorts of other messages clamoring for their attention.

Some that would claim to be more exciting, more attractive, or maybe just easier to follow. And so they need reminded. They need reminded again.

And again. Because Timothy may receive discouragement. There may be reasons that he would want to stop.

People might be looking down on him for preaching that same old gospel that Paul preached all those years ago. He's not moving with the times. He's not preaching the new, trendy message.

[7 : 20] Or maybe he might just think, he's already said it enough times. He just wants a break. But Paul tells him to keep on.

To tell them again. And so, what are these things that it's so important that Paul reminds them of? It's unclear whether he's just referring back to the couple of verses before, or everything that's gone before.

But I don't think it really matters. Either way, we see it comes down to one thing. The gospel. In verse 8, he has told Timothy to remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.

This is my gospel for which I am suffering. In verse 10, he writes of the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

Back in chapter 1, verses 9 and 10, he's written, He has saved us and called us to a holy life.

[8 : 32] Not because of anything we have done, but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.

But it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

And you see here that Paul, every time he speaks of it, emphasizes a different part. If we look through all his writings, we get all different angles on it. He talks of the unmerited grace.

He talks of the power of the resurrection. The fulfilled prophecies. The future glory. The call to holy living. He tells Timothy to remind them of these things.

To remind the Ephesians of the glory of the gospel. That whatever way you look at it, whatever side you take it from, is better than anything that these false teachers could offer.

[9 : 37] And that it's something that's worth living for. Something worth suffering for. Even something worth dying for. But along with the glory of the gospel, he also reminds Timothy of the exclusivity of the gospel.

In verse 12, he said, if we disown him, he will disown us. The gospel he is proclaiming has glorious promises.

But it's a gospel that can be accepted or rejected. It's a gospel that is a universal offer. But it's not a gospel of universal salvation.

And so you see, it's not just of academic interest whether the Ephesians accept the teachings of Timothy or the teachings of these other teachers. As we're going to see repeatedly through this passage, the truth matters.

And you see, while this was written to Timothy all those years ago in a specific circumstance, I don't think this call is relevant only to him.

[10 : 52] In fact, I don't think this call is even just relevant to church leaders, teachers, evangelists, other professional Christians. Instead, this is a task for all of us.

A few months ago in Hebrews 3, we were reminded to encourage one another daily so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

All of us need to be reminded constantly of the gospel. In particular, when our brothers and sisters are struggling, when they come to us for advice, for counsel, for encouragement, do we just give them the best advice we can think of?

The things that we have learnt from our own experience, the things that we can somehow work out, yeah, that should probably work. Or are we reminding them again of the gospel?

Are we reminding them of their status in Christ when they doubt it? Are we reminding them of the great price that has been paid for them? Both the wonderful reassurance of that, but also the challenge that they have been bought.

[12 : 06] They are not their own. Are we reminding them of the work that is being done in them and through them? Are we reminding them of the hope that's reserved for them?

Are we reminding them of the Father whose eye is on the sparrow, the Father who cares about their particular circumstance far more than they ever could, but cares infinitely more about their eternal glory?

One of the old hymns has the following lines. Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon. The early dew of morning has passed away at noon.

Tell me the story always, if you would really be in any time of trouble a comforter to me. Tell me the same old story when you have caused to fear that this world's empty glory is costing me too dear.

Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and his love. And so following this call to remind him of the gospel, in verse 15, we see that Timothy is told, do your best to present yourself to God as one approved.

[13 : 34] A worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. Must admit, that's a quite challenging passage to be the one handling.

But, in the context of false teachers, of people looking for other, more palatable teaching, Paul wants Timothy to remember whose approval actually matters.

It doesn't matter whether people approve of his teaching. It doesn't matter if they look down on him, ridicule him. It doesn't even matter if the church is preaching and empties as they all go to the one down the road where someone else is preaching something that they prefer to hear.

What matters is that he can stand unashamed before God because he is doing his best to handle the word correctly.

Seems there's numerous ways of translating these words. correctly handles, rightly divides, cutting in a straight line, preaching straightforwardly, and numerous attempts to explain what the metaphor is about.

[14 : 52] But basically, it seems to just be about treating the Bible honestly and accurately. About reading what it says, not what you want it to say.

about seeking to understand what it means, not what you want it to mean. And of trying to apply it as it shapes your world view, your thoughts, your words, your actions.

But I'm not naive. I know this is often much easier said than done. many times we'll struggle to understand what the text means.

Other times we'll struggle to understand how we can apply it today in our 21st century world. And often we'll struggle with putting that call into action.

And there may be a lot of background reading, a lot of other things that we need to look into to understand the context in which it's written. Things that we need to understand to be able to get what the author is on about.

[16 : 14] And even then, often two Christians faithfully and prayerfully seeking to understand the Bible make it come up with two different interpretations of the same passage.

and that's to be expected. We're weak. We're limited. We're fallen, although being redeemed.

But are we, like Timothy, doing our best to correctly handle the word? Or are we slapdash at best? Or are we even looking to handle scripture in a way so that it backs up our ideas, our preconceptions, our views?

As Shakespeare would remind us in The Merchant of Venice, the devil can cite scripture for his own purpose. And once again, this is not just to Timothy.

This is not even just to teachers. This is relevant for us all. We should all be handling the word. And we should all be seeking to handle it well.

[17 : 28] So how are we handling it in our private study, in our devotions, in our conversations with friends, in our small groups, as we teach our children, in whatever context that we're handling it?

Are we seriously trying to handle it properly? Because you see, we've got these positive encouragements that Paul gives Timothy, but he sets them off against warnings, against things that are to be avoided.

In verse 14, Timothy was told, warn them before God against quarreling about words. It seems what he's warning them about is the exact opposite of correctly handling the word of truth.

they're focusing on the words. They're trying to find hidden meanings, trying to work out a different way of interpreting the text, ultimately trying to avoid the truth that is staring them in the face if they were willing to actually read it.

If we remember back to the Garden of Eden, the serpent said to Eve, did God really say? It seems that this is exactly what's going on here.

[19 : 00] And then in verse 16, he's told to avoid godless chatter, another phrase that gets translated a huge number of different ways. But what does it mean?

Godless chatter? Does that mean ideally discussing the weather or other trivial things? gossiping and other things like that?

The first at times may be a distraction. The second is condemned outright elsewhere. But in the context, I don't think that's what he's talking about.

At the end of the first letter to Timothy, he uses the exact same words. But he continues the sentence to elaborate a bit.

He talks about godless chatter, the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge. It seems that what he's talking about is instead the sort of talk or debate that claims to be profound, that claims to be intelligent, important, to teach us something new.

[20 : 13] But ultimately it's speculation at best and deception at worst. But when we read warnings like this, some Christians would take this as a reason to avoid all theological discussions.

In fact, the whole concept of theology at all, they would say, well, actually, no, no, that's arguing about words, we shouldn't be doing that. And I don't think that at all is what Paul intends us to understand.

Because you see, we repeatedly, through Acts, we read that Paul was very well educated, both in the scriptures and in the writings and philosophy of the culture around him.

He was more than willing to debate with the Jews, with the Greeks, even with other apostles when necessary. And so, I don't think Paul is saying that all debate, discussion, argument of any sort is wrong.

While some things that go on under the name of theology are dubious, dangerous, and exactly what Paul is condemning here, I think it's important that we recognize there are different sort of arguments.

[21 : 45] Some are necessary and good. Some are to be condemned. Then there are some that are to be handled with caution. The first sort is what Anselm called faith-seeking understanding.

this is when we're honestly trying to understand in order that we can follow, worship, and obey better. This is the questioning of Mary, who in her acceptance of the role given to her, asks, how will this be?

Or of the Bereans, who examined the scriptures daily to see if what Paul said was true? Or this is the council at Jerusalem trying to work out how to handle this new Gentile church?

Or Paul reasoning daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus? This is exactly the sort of discussion, even at times argument, that we should be engaging in.

as we seek to understand, as we seek to encourage one another to understand, to grow in truth, and to correct error.

[23 : 09] And then there's the second sort, the sort that probably I would find the easiest to get involved in. This is the sort that is intellectually enjoyable, but potentially distracting.

It's the sort that involves playing about with ideas just for the sheer pleasure of doing so. Sometimes it will provide understanding.

Other times, I would suggest it's a perfectly acceptable form of leisure, of celebrating the intellect God has given us.

In another context, running a race is essentially pointless, achieves no purpose. And yet Eric Liddell could say, God made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure.

And so sometimes just using the gifts God has given us for enjoyment are actually a form of worship. But, but there is danger in it.

[24 : 22] Firstly, it can serve as a substitute. and a distraction from real truth-seeking. It can also result in flippantly questioning the core of our faith, which to question in the right context, trying to seek understanding is good, but to question as a leisure activity, less so.

and particularly caution must be taken if there are others listening in. What to us might be a discussion that we know exactly what we're doing, to someone else, particularly just hearing a bit of it, might be led down a completely wrong path.

truth. And so there I would say we should have caution. But then there's the sort that Paul is talking about here.

This is the sort of argument that is not seeking truth at all. This is the sort of argument that seeks to twist the truth, the sort of argument that tries to avoid it, tries to turn it into something completely different.

And it's clearly something that Paul takes very seriously. In verse 14, he's said to warn them before God. This is the same strong words that he's going to use to Timothy in chapter 4.

[26 : 00] This is a solemn charge to them. This is not just a maybe encourage them slightly. So if it's this important, why? Why does it matter?

I think Paul gives three reasons although they're essentially all one. In verse 14, we read, it only ruins those who listen.

And in verse 16, those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. And in verse 18, they destroy the faith of some.

What Paul is saying loud and clear here is that the truth matters. It's not a matter of mere interest whether you believe the teachings of Jesus Christ or Joseph Smith.

What is at stake here is salvation, the eternal destinies of those who are deceived by false teaching? If we were to teach that all ways lead to God, that the gospel doesn't involve a call to repentance, to a changed life, that there is no future punishment, that God wants us all to be healthy and rich, if we were to teach such things and many others instead of holding out the truth of the gospel, truth that warns of that coming judgment, but truth that also offers full and free salvation, we're giving false hope.

[27 : 50] We're causing those who know the truth to doubt. And so this is really vitally important. Paul gives us a bit of a case study here in verses 17 and 18.

He writes here of two teachers, Hymenaeus and Philetus. Hymenaeus, he mentioned back in his first letter to Timothy, at that time as a blasphemer who had shipwrecked his faith, and he's still there.

He's still doing the same thing. And what they are teaching here is that the resurrection has already taken place. It would be obvious to all of them there that this is not true in a literal sense, because Stephen and other martyrs are not coming to preach to them.

And they are clearly still living in ordinary fallen bodies, in an ordinary fallen world, with all the evil, sin, pain, and suffering around them.

And so when they're teaching that the resurrection has already happened, they're actually saying that the resurrection is no resurrection at all. They're saying, well, it doesn't really mean that.

[29 : 22] it's just a metaphor, a metaphor for some spiritual mystery. But then there's no future hope.

As Paul said to the Corinthians, if there is no resurrection, then, what does he say again? Sorry?

Our hope is in vain. Exactly. Our hope is in vain. So, if the resurrection has happened, well, it's not a resurrection.

But also, they're continuing the lie that the physical world, the physical body, didn't matter. And by doing that, they're essentially saying, what we do with our bodies doesn't matter.

That there's no need for change, for repentance, for sanctification, because, well, this body, we can forget about it. And so, essentially, they were teaching the lie that our world would teach us today.

[30 : 31] That what we believe is a purely personal, internal matter. It should have no impact on how we act, and it has absolutely no relevance to do with the realities of life and death.

And so, it's easy to see how such teaching could have devastating impact on the faith of those who heard them. Especially if they had not been grounded in sound teaching, if they were not being repeatedly reminded of the truth of the gospel, if they did not have that foundation to realize that this could not be true.

And I'm aware of the danger in some of the things I've been saying. I've talked of those who have walked away from their faith.

Paul has talked of those who hear false teachings been ruined and their faith destroyed. and I've talked of the necessity to constantly remind one another of the gospel that we too will not fall.

But this passage finishes with a verse that at once gives us reassurance and challenge. In verse 19, God's solid foundation stands firm.

[32 : 06] however dangerous these false teachers might be. The gospel still stands and God is still building his church long after we can remember what those false teachers were teaching about.

And then it goes on to say, the Lord knows those who are his. as Jesus said, recorded in John's gospel, I know them and they follow me.

I give them eternal life and they shall never perish. No one shall snatch them out of my hand. So if we are his, then our salvation is secure.

That can never be taken away from us. which leaves the question of those who have turned away from their faith. To a certain extent, we are not qualified to understand.

However, there are two options. One, they were never saved in the first place. They only were putting on an outward display, an outward display that may have deceived even themselves.

[33 : 35] Or, they are truly and permanently saved and have temporarily turned away to be brought back again. To a certain extent, as far as we are concerned, it makes little difference.

Either way, they need to hear once again the gospel that they have rejected. Either to bring them to salvation or to bring them back to a fruitful Christian life.

Because, along with this reassurance, there is a challenge. Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.

truth on its own is not enough. It's not an option, in fact. Truth demands a response.

And that response must result in transformation. salvation. And so that gets us to the end of this passage here.

[34 : 53] But what can sometimes be frustrating as we read these letters in the New Testament, is we're getting one bit of a conversation. We don't quite know what happened before, can make some guesses on some other things, and we don't really know what happened afterwards.

how they were received. Did this have the desired effect? In this case, actually, we do know. Because probably around about 15 years later or so, John is in exile on Patmos.

And he receives there a vision of the risen Christ who gives him messages for several of the churches. churches. The first of these is to this church, the church in Ephesus.

And we read, these are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your deeds, your hard work, and your perseverance.

I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people and that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false.

[36 : 14] You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary. And so, it seems the warnings had effect.

The false teachers that Paul had warned the elders about way back at Miletus, that he'd written to Timothy about in his first letter, and that Timothy was still struggling with when he writes his second letter.

It seems that they've been dealt with. They have recognized the false teachers and they've rejected them and their teaching. So, everything's good?

Everything's sorted? Not quite. Because, you see, the message continues. yet, I hold this against you.

You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen. Repent and do the things you did at first.

[37 : 21] If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. And so, what's presented here is possibly a fate worse than heresy.

What they have here is an orthodoxy that is dead. They've rejected the false teachers. They've got their theology right.

They're teaching the right things. They've ticked all the boxes but they've forgotten why it matters. they've worked so hard fighting for the truth, opposing those who would teach lies, but they've forgotten who it is truth about.

And so, I would repeat again, truth matters. It really does matter. It's a matter of more than life and death. But truth only matters if we're seeking to learn it, explore, it, understand it, teach it, correct error and train others because of our love for Christ.

If we do it for any other reason, then quite frankly, we're wasting our time. Knowing the truth inside out will not help us stand secure.

[38 : 50] Sorry. Will not enable us to stand secure. It will help. truth matters. But what matters far more is that we love the one that the gospel is all about.

God is all about it. And if we're to continue loving him, we need to keep reminding each other of the truth about him so that we can love him, so that we can tell each other about him, so that we can love him.

And it feeds back and forwards. So once again, tell me the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

Amen.