

An Approved Worker

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[0 : 00] Thanks very much, Aaron. Good evening, everyone. As Aaron said, it's particularly good to see you this evening when we're a little bit smaller in numbers. I want to begin by talking about two of the finest visiting preachers we've been privileged to have in this church.

Now, I recognise that quite personal, our assessment of preachers at times, and someone I love, you might find unhelpful and vice versa. But I'm confident that there was probably no more than two or three people here who might remember these men will share my view of them.

Derek Prime, for many years, was the minister at Charlotte Chapel, very influential at that time, much loved, and still was influenced by people like Alistair Begg and others who were trained by him.

In his retirement, he came reasonably regularly to Brunfield, as well as having a really good ministry of writing. I recommend his books if you're interested.

W.K. Morrison, Willie Morrison, was a head teacher in Falkirk of a big comprehensive school. He won the OBE for his services to education, but was also well known in circles like this as a Bible teacher.

[1 : 08] I think like my father and a number of that generation, he would often be out preaching two or three times a week or even more. It's amazing the amount that some of them managed to do. Willie Morrison kept going with his teaching well into his 80s.

Even after he was virtually blind, he still had this desire to pass on what the Lord had shown to him. You may be saying, well, why do I think that these are two of the finest preachers that we've had at this church?

And there are two main reasons. One is that they made the Bible clear to us. Their teaching was plain. It was thoroughly Bible-based. And you went away thinking, I really understand the passage they've been preaching on and also what it means to me.

They didn't go down unhelpful byways or try to show off their learning as some preachers do. They were simply interested in teaching us God's word, helping us to understand it and to apply it.

And certainly my ambition tonight, and I know my preaching, would be that people go away thinking, yes, I understand what that passage is about. And I hope we will achieve that this evening.

[2 : 18] There's a second reason, though, why I think these two gentlemen were very fine preachers. And that's that in their preaching, they were gentle and humble. Now, we need dynamic preachers.

We need, like, to have a way in certain occasions to come along and to stir us up. But in both Derek Prime and Willie Morrison, they didn't raise their voices. They didn't try to be too energetic on the platform.

They simply explained God's word and did in a way that helped you to realize that they were humbly passing on what the Lord had given to them and were being very gentle in how they did it. And in that, they were compelling. You don't need to raise your voice for people to listen to you. If you've got authority and if you come across as someone who really understands and who cares about people, that is enough.

And these two gentlemen certainly did that. People quite regularly said, I think he's a really nice man when they heard them speaking. And they're absolutely right. I got to know both of them. They were lovely Christians.

[3 : 23] And I think when we come to this pastor in 2 Timothy we're looking at this evening, these are the two key things that Paul is trying to teach to Timothy. One is that you need to deal with God's word in a way that's accurate and that's plain and simple.

Don't get distracted by arguments and by philosophies and by things that are of no great relevance. Teach the word. Teach it plainly. But he's also saying in your dealings with others, as a leader in the church, as a preacher, be gentle.

You're not called to be aggressive in the way you deal with others, even if they oppose you, even if they're wrong. It's much better to be gentle and to correct them in that way.

And I hope we'll see both of these things as we go through. There's also a bit in the middle which reminds us that our lives matter, that we need to be pure in the way that we live. A bit of background before we get into the pastor in more detail.

2 Timothy, as I'm sure you know, is Paul's last letter that we have. It was written when he was in prison. He expected to be martyred very soon afterwards. And he's passing on his final advice to Timothy.

[4 : 37] He's passing the baton is the title of our series. He's reminded Timothy of the qualities that he needs to stand as a Christian, to stand firm in a world that's hostile, and sometimes even in a church where there's hostility towards him.

In chapter 3, that's what we've looked at the last two times with Graham and myself, and Paul, first of all, talks about three pictures of the Christian and the kind of commitment that we need.

We're to be like a soldier who gives up civilian affairs to be wholeheartedly in service. We're to be like an athlete who plays by the rules. And we're to be like a farmer who's working hard to bring in a good crop.

Last week, we looked at why this is worthwhile. Why should we do this? There was a summary of the gospel focusing on Jesus and all that he's done for us. Paul talked about a sacrifice that's worth making so that others will come to faith in Christ.

And then at the end, there's what was probably a song, a song of reward and rejection, reminding us that there will be a judgment for Christ. And our works will be judged before the Lord, not for salvation.

[5 : 47] But some people will be commended for what they have done for Christ. Others will not be because they haven't lived faithfully for him. This week, we have three more pictures, three more things that Paul uses to describe a Christian.

We're to be an approved worker, we're to be a valuable vessel, and we're to be a gentle servant. So first of all, the Christian as an approved worker.

Paul tells Timothy to remind people of the truth he just passed on, perhaps particularly that little song in verses 11 to 13. But then he goes on and says, Timothy, you've got to warn people.

There are dangers that need to be avoided. There are challenges that people will face and that you will face as well. And he says, concentrates on three things in particular.

First, he says that people are arguing, quarrelling about words. That's in verse 16. Now, words matter.

[6 : 54] I will be talking a bit about the meaning of some words as we go through this evening. It's not that we have to ignore the words of Scripture. All of them are inspired and are from God.

But it looks like some people in Ephesus, where Timothy was, were spending their whole time quarrelling about the fine detail of words, nuances in words, interpretations of them. And they were losing the big picture.

They weren't recognising that we need to look at the plain meaning of Scripture. We need to see what God is trying to say to us, not try to be too clever and argue with people about what this means or what that means.

Words, as I said, are important, but far more important is that we understand what God is saying and that we obey it. Paul says that arguing about words has no value and it ruins those who listen.

The word he uses is actually catastrophe. It's a catastrophe for those who get involved in this kind of arguing about words if it has no value, if it's not done with the right motives.

[7 : 59] And then Paul moves on. The second thing he talks about is godless chatter. Now, that would include, I suspect, the arguments about words, but it goes beyond that.

It's a kind of pointless speculation you sometimes get when people are more interested in showing off their knowledge and understanding than they are in seeing what the Scripture really has to say. Discussing things that have no value, leading others astray, perhaps speculating about meanings of different passages or different words without looking at what God is saying to us.

And Paul says that people who are like that, they become more and more ungodly. That kind of speculation and pointless arguments about Scripture doesn't lead us to God. It leads us away from God. And Paul says that kind of teaching is like gangrene. If you get gangrene in your body, if it's not treated effectively, it will very quickly spread and will paralyze and infect the whole body.

[9 : 04] And Paul says these kind of people and these kinds of pointless speculation, that is what they do. They mean that the body of Christ, the Church, isn't able to function as it should.

And then finally, he talks about what I take to be straightforward false doctrine. Things that directly contradict the truth. And he says there are these two men, Hymenaeus and Philetus, who were particularly guilty of that.

We don't know anything about these two men, apart from Hymenaeus was mentioned in 1 Timothy in a similar context. But Paul tells us a little about their heresy. They were claiming that their resurrection had already taken place.

Now, clearly, they're not talking about the resurrection of Jesus, because that had taken place. So it looks like they're saying that the resurrection of the Christians, such as they believed in it, has already happened.

It's a spiritual thing that there is no physical aspect to it. And, of course, the teaching of Scripture is that Christ has been physically raised from the dead. And so will we be if we die before he returns.

[10 : 11] The resurrection of Christ was not just spiritual, it was his bodily resurrection. And we will be raised similarly if we should die. Their teaching must have seemed superficially attractive to people.

Perhaps they were accompanying it, as some people did, by saying, well, the body doesn't really matter then. All that matters is your soul is saved. Do what you like with your body. Just feed your bodily appetite.

It'll be okay. Okay. So they were taking people away from true faith in Jesus. They were destroying the faith of others. Paul is very clear that such people should have no place on our platforms and churches, or teaching our growth groups, or in any other kind of Christian context, because they're not building people up in faith.

They're bringing them down. They're destroying faith. So how can we counter that kind of person? Well, Paul says there are two key elements.

Our part and the part that only God can play. What we're responsible for is to be approved workmen or approved people working for God.

[11 : 25] People who won't be ashamed when the Lord looks at our lives and assesses what we have done with them. Have we drawn people towards Jesus? Have we attracted them through Jesus, through our lives, and through what we said to them?

Or have we turned them away from the truths of the gospel? Paul says if you're going to be an approved workman, Timothy, you need to work at it, and you need to make sure you're not going to be ashamed.

And why won't Timothy be ashamed? He won't be ashamed, says Paul, because he's correctly handled the word of truth. As I was thinking about Derek Prime and Willie Morrison earlier on as men who did that, so Timothy is called to do the same.

And if we're in any situation where we're teaching, or where we're witnessing to others about our faith, then we need to correctly handle the word of faith. Not get involved in pointless arguments, but stay true to Scripture, and point people towards Jesus, and encourage one another in godly living.

And then alongside that, there's God's part. And Paul talks about that by referring to a passage from the Old Testament. Not entirely clear as you just read the passage, what it is.

[12 : 42] But Paul's referring back to a passage in Numbers chapter 16, where there was a big revolt against Moses by Korah and others, and Moses had to put that down.

And Paul says, well, God has given us these words that are in Numbers 16, at least in the Septuagint. They're not quite that way in the English Bible. The way they're translated in the Greek version of the Bible, Paul says, these are like inscriptions sealed by God to give us a solid foundation to build on.

They're there so that we can be sure that we are dealing with the truth and that it will never change because it's been sealed by God.

In two quotations, one of them reminds us of what God alone knows. God knows those who are his. Our responsibility is to tell others the message of salvation and to encourage one another in our faith, but only God knows what's in our hearts and what's in the hearts of those we may be speaking to.

Only those he draws to himself will come to believe in Jesus. Salvation is God's work. Our part is simply to be faithful to the truth and to his word.

[14:06] What is rather more evident in terms of what God does is that if people are truly believing in him, if they are truly trusting in Jesus, that will make a difference in their lives.

The gospel should have a positive effect. If someone is still living a sinful, a blatantly sinful life, even though they claim to be a Christian, then to some extent perhaps there needs to be a question, well, is their faith genuine?

Have they really understood what Jesus has done for them? If we're receiving sound teaching, if we're believing the word of God, if we understand what the Lord Jesus has done for us, that will affect us in our lives and our attitudes, and we'll become more like Jesus.

That's why we must focus on sound teaching and what really matters in our faith. Before we move on, let me talk just briefly about two phrases in this section.

Verse 15 says that the approved worker correctly handles the word of truth. Literally, it means that he or she is someone who cuts straight.

[15:25] And the picture is probably of a road. The Romans, as I'm sure you know, were famous for their roads. All roads lead to Rome. And the roads were straight and they went in the direction they were meant to.

A straight road brings you to your destination quickly and efficiently. Whereas if you have a road that twists and turns or there are lots of detours, then you're going to take a lot longer and you're much more likely to get lost.

So someone who's correctly handling the word of truth is helping others to understand by being clear and straightforward. The second phrase describes those who have departed from the truth. And literally it means they've missed the target. Now the analogy is probably archery. I couldn't find a decent archery picture, so I've used archery instead. But that's the picture. It is someone who has aimed forward, but they've gone well wide of the target.

And if you think particularly in the context of archery, if someone shoots the arrow and it goes way off to the side, is your eye on the arrow or is it on the target?

[16:35] Your eye follows the arrow and you're led away from the target. Paul says that's the effect of arguments about words, godless chatter, false teaching.

It takes people's attention away from Jesus. So the challenge for us, whether we're leaders in the church or another Christian context, whether we're teaching in any context, or whether we're just talking to people about Jesus in our everyday life, are we people who lead others to Jesus in a clear, straightforward way?

Or are we those who distract them and who effectively lead them away from the truth of the gospel? So that's verses 16 to 19.

Let's look at the next few verses. I've called this a special vessel. The analogy here is one that we can probably fairly understand fairly easily.

I suspect my generation may be almost the last where we have special china that you only bring out on special occasions when you've got guests. But that's kind of the picture that Paul is painting here.

[17:42] You've got the house and you've got some vessels that are for everyday use and it doesn't matter what they look like. As long as they're functional, they're fine. And then you've got some things that are a bit more special that you bring out for special occasions.

And you're kind of showing off that you have got good china or whatever it is. Now, in one sense, we are never going to be anything more than jars of clay.

That's what Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians. We're jars of clay with treasure in us. But we are called to be good vessels fit for the master's use. So that God can look at us and commend us and say, yes, these are good vessels that I can be proud of.

They're not things that I should be ashamed of. And the way we do that, says Paul, is to cleanse ourselves. No one wants to eat or drink out of something that's dirty.

He wants something that's clean and fit for purpose. And Paul says we need to be fit for God's use. And then we'll be holy, we'll be set aside for good purposes, and we'll be ready to serve God as he calls us to.

[18 : 56] And in that context, in verse 22, Paul talks about Timothy needing to flee the evil desires of youth. Now, the evil desires of youth can cover a multitude of different sins.

But in the context, I think a lot of its significance could be in what's sometimes called the arrogance of youth. Young people often think they know everything and they know better than older people. Perhaps sometimes they're right, and not all young people are like that. But there certainly is a temptation for young people to think, yes, I know what's right. My way is correct. And I'm going to argue with anyone who disagrees.

I'm not going to accept a different answer. Sometimes, not always, older people develop a humility which helps them to recognize, well, I may have been wrong in the past.

I've got a picture of Willie Morrison earlier on. And I remember once he said to me that there were things, secondary matters of doctrine, not the key truths of the faith, but there were things that he was certain about when he was a young man that he's a lot less confident in as he grows older.

[20 : 04] Other Christians who he knows are godly and have similar faith to him or to what he had in God's word came to a different view. And he recognized, well, perhaps I'm not always right.

And we need a bit of humility. We need not to be too arrogant in our Christian lives. But whatever the evil that Paul is particularly thinking about, he must flee, Timothy must flee from that.

But at the same time, he must be pursuing a number of things. Righteousness, faith, love, and peace. And joining, says Paul, with those who call on God, the Lord, out of a pure heart.

Because all these qualities are ones we see in Jesus. And as in everything, if we follow the example of the Lord Jesus, then we will get it right. We will display righteousness, faith, love, and peace.

And that should be our ambition as Christians. But to do that, we need to purify ourselves. We need to get rid, as far as we can, of the sin of the desires that so easily come upon us.

[21 : 12] And live lives that are consistent with our testimony for the Lord Jesus. So that's the special vessel. Then the third wee section I've called a gentle servant.

And Paul ends by returning to where he started. He's back again with these people who peddle false doctrine and would lead others away from the truth. In the early verses, he says he's extracting Timothy to make sure that other people don't follow these false teachers, to warn people about the dangers associated with them.

Here he's talking about how should you deal with such people. How should you deal with those who come into the church and who would lead others astray?

And perhaps a little surprising what he says. In verses 23 and 24, he says that Timothy should be kind-hearted. He should avoid becoming quarrelsome and resentful.

And instead, he should be kind to everyone. The word translated kind is quite an interesting one. Paul uses in 1 Thessalonians chapter 2.

[22 : 22] And he says, When we were gentle among you like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. That word that's translated gentle in 1 Thessalonians 2 is the word that is kind-hearted here.

So in other words, we are to be like a mother who really cares for a child. There's no more beautiful picture than a mother who is looking after a helpless little baby, nursing it and taking care of it and making sure it's fed and well looked after.

And that's the attitude we should have towards others. We should be kind, we should want the best for them, and we should do everything we can to help them.

Another thing Paul says is we shouldn't be resentful. That is the thought of bearing evil when people do bad things to us or for us, that we shouldn't be resentful about it, but we should bear with their failings, their unkindness, their foolishness, their weakness.

We should recognize that they are people who need the Lord Jesus, who need to be corrected, and we should not resent the way they treat us.

[23 : 37] And again, the example for us is the Lord Jesus, when he was so badly treated throughout his life, but particularly as he went to the cross at Calvary. He went meekly and without resentment, entrusting himself to God and not seeking to bring others down.

And when we can be like that, when we have on the one hand the kindness, the gentleness of a mother, when on the other hand we don't get too upset when people do things that are not right to us, but we are understanding and to the extent we can be forgiving, then, says Paul, we're able to teach.

Able to teach, you may remember, is one of the qualities of elders, as said in 1 Timothy 3. And this passage reminds us, it's not just that elders must have good doctrine and be able to teach the scripture as well, it's that their attitudes and actions must be right.

And then Paul says, we're to be soft-hearted. We're to be gentle. When people oppose us, we shouldn't try to outdo them or to wish ill on them.

Rather, we should gently correct them and pray that God will work in their lives. Remember, gentleness is one of the fruits of the Spirit, and perhaps it comes out most clearly when we're being gentle towards those who haven't particularly been gentle to us.

[25 : 06] Now, that doesn't mean we overlook sin. It doesn't mean that if someone's teaching wrong things that we don't correct them and make sure people know the truth. Because, says Paul, at the end, the devil has captured them, so they need to be freed, they need to be able to repent and to recognize the truth.

We should never accept evil or wrong doctrine or wrong practice in our church or among our fellow Christians, but our priority should be the restoration of the sinner.

That doesn't usually come from a confrontation. approach. We're much more likely to win people, whether it's Christians who have gone astray or whether people are not Christians, if we deal gently with them and explain simply and straightforwardly the truths of Scripture.

Now, they may not respond the way that we would want them to. They may not repent of what they've done, and that is dependent on God's work in their lives. But our part in it is to let God do his work, but for our part, to explain the Scripture clearly and to deal gently and lovingly with those who go astray.

Let me return to Derek Prime and Willie Morrison. One other fact about them is both of them started out as teachers. Derek Prime obviously went to the pastoral ministry, but they were both trained teachers, and I think that comes across or came across in their ministries.

[26 : 38] Now, if you can cast your mind back to school, and for most of it's not nearly as long as it is for me, but you probably had quite a variety of different kinds of teachers. Some of them may have struggled to keep discipline at all in their classes.

Maybe a few didn't learn very much from them. Others used their force of personality to keep discipline. Sometimes, perhaps, they used threats or even some kinds of bullying to get people to go along with what they wanted.

The very best of them, though, like these two gentlemen, they rarely needed to raise their voices. They had a quiet authority, and the pupils knew that what they were saying would be worth listening to, that what they had learned they were passing on.

And they would accept discipline from such teachers as well, because they knew that they really cared for them. And if, perhaps, the child was going through a time of difficulty at a particular problem, they knew that this teacher was someone who would be there to help them through it.

And so when they had to be rebuked, they were willing to accept it from the teacher. That, says Paul, is what Timothy should be like, and it's what we should be like as well.

[27 : 56] As we lead and teach others, as some of us do, and even outside the church context, Christian unions and other places, some of you will do that as well. Or as we are just living for Christ in a world that's hostile, and where we're bound to face opposition if we're faithful to the gospel.

We need to do it with gentleness, with love and respect for others. And we need to be able to explain the truths of Scripture clearly and simply to attract people to Jesus.

Let me end with a quotation. This lady is Maya Angelou. She was an American civil rights activist and also quite a well-known author.

And what she said with this, and I think there's a lot of truth, and I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel.

So let's go away determined to be those who have the attitude and the gentleness of Jesus, that people can see in us something that is different, something that displays the qualities of our Lord.

[29 : 11] And as we do that, get the opportunities to talk about him and to lead others to know him. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word to us this evening.

We thank you for Paul and for his desire that Timothy should be an effective and approved worker, that in his leadership and in his teaching, he should be able to draw others to the Lord Jesus rather than turning them away, that he should be able to explain your word simply, that he should deal with kindness and compassion with others.

We pray that you will help us to be like that too. Give us that humility that we need as we recognize that without you, we are nothing. And unless it's done in your strength, anything that we try to do will be worth nothing and have no spiritual effect.

Make us like Jesus in our thoughts, in our attitudes, in our actions, in our words. We thank you for your presence this evening. Even though there are just a few of us, we thank you that we can come and learn your word together.

And we commit ourselves to you now. In Jesus' name. Amen.