

Be a Container of Truth

Theme: Good teachers have authority because of the clarity and simplicity of their teaching and the moral consistency of their lives.

Text: II Timothy 2:14-26

Series: Live With The End In Mind

Introduction:

I hope you are starting to identify with this young protégé of the apostle Paul, named Timothy. The last three Sundays of May, we have been reading their mail. We have been eavesdropping on very personal thoughts written by a man who knows that his end is near. Before Paul departed from this earth he had one last letter in him. He chose to send that letter to one he considers his "son in the faith". The year is 67 AD. Paul languishes practically alone in Rome in a prison cell, awaiting his demise.

When we left Timothy two weeks ago, we discovered that Paul was deeply concerned that Timothy was not bearing up under the pressure. Desertion and abdication of the faith were the order of the day. Paul was feeling it personally. His former friends and colleagues in the faith were acting like they didn't know him. They were ashamed to associate with this prisoner. Fearful that Timothy could be the next casualty, Paul reminds Timothy in the strongest possible terms what it means to be faithful. Paul is attempting to complete a hand-off. We used the image of runners in a relay race who, in order to win the prize, must pass the baton from one runner to the next. In this race, the baton is the good news of the gospel.

Paul doesn't soft pedal the cost nor paint a rosy picture of what it means to be faithful. Suffering is a part of the deal. Paul says essentially, to fulfill your ministry, Timothy, it will require diligence and discipline. To get this point across Paul chose three metaphors: 1. A *good soldier* is under the authority of his commanding officer. 2. An *athlete* brings his body into submission in order to compete. 3. A *farmer* receives the reward of the harvest by working from sunrise to sunset. Scott Peck begins his well read classic, *The Road Less Traveled*, with the sunny message, "*Life is difficult.*" He then goes on to say that this is a great truth. Those who accept it, transcend it. Timothy, if you are expecting life to be easy, comfortable and untroubled, not only will you be disappointed, but you, too, will fall by the wayside. You will miss the reward waiting for you.

In our text for this morning, Paul harkens back to the first chapter when he exhorted Timothy to "**fan into the flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.**" Timothy has been given a ministry confirmed in a prophetic word. As the pastor of the church in Ephesus, one of his roles was to be a teacher. It is to this responsibility that Paul now turns. The

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theme of our text today, II Timothy 2:14-26, is that good teachers are clear and succinct, and underscore what they teach by the way they live.

Read II Timothy 2:14-26

Throughout this passage Paul sets up a contrast between a good and bad teacher. There are three marks of a good teacher. First, a good teacher teaches truth clearly. Second, a good teacher lives the truth. 3. The good teacher corrects error with gentleness.

I. The good teacher teaches what is true (v. 14-19). v. 15 is a succinct statement of the role of an effective teacher. **"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."** The word **"approved"** means to pass a test, like metal passing through a fire to remove the impurities. You pass the test of a teacher, Timothy, when you correctly handle the truth. Some of you probably learned this verse in the old KJV that says, **"rightly dividing the word of truth."** The image here is that of cutting a straight path which one can follow through the countryside. One cuts a path as the shortest distance to the destination. From the world of farming, it means to plow a straight furrow in the ground. The verse I have placed on the front of the bulletin captures this same image, **"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight"** (Proverbs 3:5,6)

Next Sunday, we will look more carefully at the well known verses describing the nature of the Bible as stated at the end of the 3rd chapter, **"All Scripture is inspired of God, and profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness..."** (3:16) Suffice it to say today, we have revealed truth that comes from God that is given to light our path through life. The truth in Scripture, as the Psalmist says, is "a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path."

Ken Blanchard, the well known business guru, and the author of the *One Minute Manager*, has in the last number of years come to faith in Jesus Christ. Scripture was a new world to him. But he found that it was through God's word that the path was cut straight for him. He uses a memorable acronym when it comes to the letters of Bible. The B.I.B.L.E. is **"Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth."** Blanchard writes, **"That's a humorous way to remember that God inspired writers to preserve His teachings so that we would know how to live. Spending time each day reading the Bible gives you direct access to God. It is more than a reading assignment; it is a way to understand how God wants you to live. I seldom come away from reading the Bible without learning some important nugget of truth."**

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In other words, right teaching leads to right living. The transformed mind leads to a transformed life. How we think about God fuels how we respond to God. There is a discipleship of the mind. Being a Christian is not to be a lazy thinker. I have actually heard people say, "When I come to church I don't want to have to think." I guess this person would like us to edit Jesus' admonition to "love the Lord your God with all your mind." Words like doctrine, dogma, and theology have a heavy feeling today. But if doctrine is simply the teachings of the faith found in the Scripture, then our understanding must be informed, so that we know how to live.

One of my favorite cartoons makes this point about the value of doctrine. In a *Peanuts* cartoon Linus and Lucy are involved in substantive dialogue. Lucy is worried because it has been raining so hard for so long. She wonders whether there will be another world flood as in the days of Noah. Linus informs her that this won't happen. Referring to Genesis 9, he reminds her that God promised never to flood the earth again. Lucy says, "Well, that's a load off my mind." Linus, still sucking on his blanket, says, "Yes, sound theology will do that."

So Paul is telling Timothy to be the kind of teacher of truth so that people have a straight path to follow. Or to use another image, he is to lay down the tracks so that the train of our lives can run on them. This is the truth of God's word.

On the other hand, there are those who have wandered from this straight path and are teaching things that are not true. Picking up at v. 16, "Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some." In contrast to Timothy's straight path, there are those who have wandered away, and literally "missed the target". What they are teaching falls short of the bullseye of truth. This error Paul refers to as "godless chatter", and in v. 14 "quarreling about words", are on the order of theological speculation.

We don't know anything about Hymenaeus and Philetus, but we do know a bit about the false teaching they were propagating. "They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some." (v. 18) We are not exactly sure what this teaching was, but apparently these two taught that believers had no future hope that they too would be bodily raised with Christ. They had nothing to look forward to. Because of this lack of hope during a time of persecution, people abandoned their faith.

In other words, doctrine matters. Paul compares this false teaching to "gangrene". It can infect the community and spread its malicious lies. For

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example, I have seen this distortion of truth in the denomination in which I have my ordination. I am a part of what has been known as the mainline denominations, represented by Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist, etc. They are all on parallel theological tracks. At a national leadership level they are playing loose with foundational historical doctrine. One of these is the doctrine of grace. As best I understand it biblically, grace is God's lavish love in Jesus Christ that redeems us from an old, self-destructive life of sin and offers us forgiveness and a clean start into a new way in which we are to live. But grace, at the higher eschelons of the mainline denominations, has been reinterpreted to mean that God accepts all people as they are without judgment. This all accepting grace then becomes the basis for affirming a homosexual lifestyle as a gift of God; simply an alternative way to live. How one understands grace matters. Doctrine matters. It has consequences for the way we live.

But so as to not let us off the hook, while patting ourselves self-righteously on the back, Paul quickly moves to his second point about a good teacher. Not only does a good teacher cut a straight path of truth, but he also lives the truth. What good is right teaching unless it translates into right living. This was the point that Francis of Assisi made when he said, **"Preach the gospel all the time; if necessary use words."**

II. A good teacher lives the truth. (v. 20-22) Lest the teacher be disqualified because his life is not consistent with his teaching, Paul introduces the image of noble and ignoble vessels. **"In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purpose, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work."** (v. 20, 21)

Imagine a stately mansion, Paul is saying. In these grand homes you find two kinds of vessels, those for noble use for special occasions, and those for everyday use. Eugene Peterson has captured Paul's intent well in *The Message* translation, **"In a well-furnished kitchen there are not only crystal goblets and silver platters, but waste cans and compost buckets—some containers used to serve fine meals, others to take the garbage out. Become the kind of container God can use to present any and every kind of gift to his guests for their blessing."**

Paul is writing to Timothy as a leader in the church. His life is to be a cleansed vessel so that it confirms in his manner what he is teaching in his doctrine. I can't help but think today of that shame that has been brought on the gospel, with the continuous, high profile scandals among Christian leaders. Satan has picked off one after another because of sexual immorality, misuse of funds, or the abuse of power. We who serve you ask for your protective prayers,

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knowing that we are susceptible to a fall and that we have an enemy who would love to discredit us and even more, the gospel we represent.

With this in mind, Paul says to Timothy, **"Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."** (v. 22) First, Paul tells him to flee. Literally, Timothy is to take flight, escape, don't stand and fight, but run for the hills. Though translated "flee youthful lusts", this is not simply about obsessive sexual desire. It has to do with self assertion, selfish ambition, obstinacy of the will. Bob Buford in his book *Halftime* says during the first half of our life, meaning up through mid-life, we are dominated by our desire to be successful as the world defines it.

How it is it that the world defines success? It is having "the good life" and living the American dream. What is the good life? At the time of Michael Jordan's first retirement from basketball, the owner of the Chicago Bulls, stated the goal to which he assumed all Americans aspire. Of Michael Jordan he said, **"He's living the American Dream. The American Dream is to reach a point in your life where you don't have to do anything you don't want to do and can do everything you want to do."** Read: be rich enough to be answerable to no one. Could that be any more self-absorbed? Thomas Gillespie, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, visualizes this beckoning toward the American Dream as being like a barker at carnival sideshow. Step right up. Here is the security you have been looking for. Buy this car and you'll feel free. Purchase these toys and your kids will stop complaining. Use this perfume, and you will be loveable, adorable, and worthy of being touched. Gargle with this mouthwash and people will enjoy being in your presence.

In other words, it all about *possessions, pleasures and power*. Richard Foster summarized what we need to flee from in a book title, *Money, Sex, and Power*. When you do a word study of the verb "flee", money, sex and power are the three things Paul says to flee from. In I Timothy 6:11, **"But you, man of God, flee from all this"**, this being **"the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."** I Cor. 6:18: **"Flee from sexual immorality."** Picture Joseph and Potipher's wife. I Cor. 10:14: **"Flee from idolatry."** Power. The ultimate idolatry is pride, or our own self-exaltation, making ourselves to be god. We live in a world that is all about *feeling good, looking good, and making good*. This is the allure. Flee. It can't deliver what it promises.

Some of us are not going to make it. The allure of this world is too beguiling. Some of us are living in the grip of feeling good, looking good, and making good. We don't have time for our home life, because *making good* is all consuming. Some of us have become hollow inside, because *looking good* is all that matters. We are consumed with pleasures so we go from one *feeling good*

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experience after another. We have no idea who we are and who we are becoming. We live in a tug-of-war for the soul, and almost all the messages we receive on a daily basis having nothing to do with *being good*.

Paul's concern is all about *being good*. Paul not only instructs Timothy what to turn away from, but also what to chase after. As you are running, "Pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with all those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart." (v. 22) When we think of being good, does that seem attractive? My guess is that most of us associate *being good* with conformity of our behavior to some set of restrictions. *Being good* is about, the don'ts, what we can't do in life.

Let me tell you a wonderful story that conveys a fresh appeal to the pursuit of righteousness. Becky Pippert, the author of *Hope Has Its Reasons*, tells the story of getting lost in Jerusalem which led to very insightful exchange with an Orthodox Hasidic Jew. She had gotten off at the wrong bus stop and found herself in an Orthodox Hasidic Jewish neighborhood. Bewildered, her face registering lostness, she heard a voice, "Can I help you?" When she turned there was a man with the bearded earlocks, and long black coat. Knowing that Hasidic Jewish men were not allowed to address women in public, amazement crossed her face. The man said, "Sometimes we are permitted to help people in distress. Where do you need to go?" As he walked with her in the direction she needed to get to her apartment, Becky, was told that his name was Moshe, he lived in an ultra-orthodox community, though he had been raised in Chicago.

Becky said, "We have something in common. We are both religious." He asked Becky, "Are you Jewish?" Becky replied, "No, I am a follower of Jesus." Moshe said, "I have never talked with a religious Christian before. There is much I would like to ask you, but it is so difficult. If anyone in my community saw me holding this conversation with you it would be very awkward. I have to be so careful. Yet when will I have this opportunity again?" Becky answered, "I would love to talk with you. I would be honored to have you as a guest in my house." He hesitated, glanced around to see who was watching and said, "Let us go quickly."

Once they settled in Moshe began to pepper Becky with questions. What he wanted to know was, what happened to human nature as a result of being in relationship with God through Christ. Becky responded by saying that when we put our faith in Christ, he gives us His Spirit, who transforms us day by day and enables us to live as new people with new power. Then he asked a question that I wished I would get from more Christians, "What is the essence of this new nature?" She listed the fruit of the Spirit such as Paul told Timothy to pursue.

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With all the eagerness of one with a hungry heart he said, “Wait, say those words again.” She again recited them. “Say them again”, he asked.

Then Moshe said with wonderment, “What beautiful, beautiful words. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Imagine it! All of these qualities come into your heart as a result of being in relationship with God. Just think, to receive the very nature of God as a gift. No more beating down the evil inclinations with negatives but rather fighting evil with positives, with the very attributes of God himself! Ah, what a precious gift you have inherited, Becky. Do not take it lightly.”

Moshe understood, unlike many of us, what this new nature is all about.

This is what Paul is saying to Timothy, release the life of God in you, which is “righteousness, faith, love, and peace.” Pursue these with others, who are seeking to live the good life from God’s perspective. As a teacher of truth of the life of God within, so let that life shine through.

III. The good teacher corrects error with gentleness. (v. 23-26) Paul closes this section by instructing Timothy in the manner in which he is to correct error. On that list of the fruit of the spirit that was recited by Beckly Pippert, Paul seems to highlight the one quality of *gentleness*. “And the Lord’s servant, must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to the knowledge of the truth.” (v. 24, 25) In addressing false teaching, there are three qualities that are to mark Timothy. He is to be “kind”, the same word Paul used to describe himself when he was like a nurse taking care of children. “Not resentful” translates the word forbear, meaning to bear evil without being resentful. And finally, he must “gently instruct”, so that he gives room for someone to change the errors of their ways.

I could not help but think of the way that people have remembered President Reagan this week. His affable spirit, and kind nature allowed him to have deep political and philosophical differences without turning people into bitter enemies. What a wonderful quality to come away genuinely liking the person who is your opponent! On the other hand, I have seen Christians scholars and debaters take on secular opponents in public debates with all the gentility of Genghis Khan. They skewered their opponents, won the argument, and lost the battle because their temperament was so obnoxiously arrogant.

Paul is saying to Timothy that he needs to engage in a manner that is winsome and inviting. Take away any reason in your manner that someone might have for rejecting the truth.

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Tony Campolo tells the story about a new preacher who had come to the Baptist church. Everyone was saying how good he was and how much better he was than the old preacher. A skeptic wondered what it was about his preaching that was so much better than the former pastor. The deacon said, "The old preacher told us we were lost sinners and unless we repented we were going to hell." The skeptic said, "What does the new preacher say?" They answered, "The new preacher tells us that we are all lost sinners and unless we repent we are going to hell." The skeptic said, "Well, darned if I can tell the difference." The deacon said, "Oh, there's a big difference. This one says it with tears in his eyes." Gentleness.

What are the take-aways this morning for us? 1. In the Scripture you find the straight path on which we are to live. We are to fill our minds with this truth that is our guide to life. The BIBLE: **B**asic **I**nstruction **B**efore **L**eaving **E**arth. 2. But it is not enough to compartmentalize truth, it must shape our inner world. The transformed nature means being filled by the very nature of God himself. This comes by the Word and the Spirit. Ah, what a precious gift we have inherited! 3. Finally, if we are to help others accept the truth of this word, it is a gentle spirit that will attract people to the truth. Let us learn to weep over those who know not the love of God.