

In the context of false teaching

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Preacher: Phil Martin

[0 : 00] Today's reading is from 2 Timothy chapter 2 verses 14 to 26 and on the church Bibles that's in page 1198.

2 Timothy 2 verses 14 to 26. Remind them of these things and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good but only ruins the hearers.

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.

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. 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.

[1 : 18] Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honourable use, some for dishonourable.

Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonourable, he will be a vessel for honourable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.

So flee youthful passions, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies. You know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.

God may perhaps grant them repentance, leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil after being captured by him to do his will.

[2 : 33] God may perhaps grant them repentance, and we may be quiet in our hearts to listen to you, and we do long to be wise, and we long that you would keep us in the true gospel.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. You have an outline on the back of your handout, if that's useful.

Our subject today is how to guard the gospel faithfully in the context of false teaching within the church.

It's going to affect what kinds of churches we go to and get behind. It will affect what we expect as normal in the church today.

Now, we're coming back to this series in 2 Timothy. Those of us who were with us a few weeks ago, we talked about how this is Paul's last letter, and he writes it from a dungeon in Rome, and he's about to die.

[4 : 15] And you can see that in 2 verse 9. He's bound with chains as a criminal. You can see that in 4 verse 6, where he says, I'm being poured out as a drink offering, and my time of departure has come.

He knows he's about to die. He writes to Timothy, guard the gospel. One thing that's really struck me coming to 2 Timothy is that Paul did not die riding a wave of revival within the church.

I think I kind of assumed that that was the case, you know, after all his mission trips and all of that, and the beginnings, the dramatic beginnings of the church in Acts.

But rather, Paul died watching on as influencers and teachers within the church refashioned the Christian message into something different. See that in 1 verse 15?

You're aware that all who are in Asia have turned away from me. That is me, the apostle Paul, and my gospel. And then 2 verse 17 in our section, Hymenaeus and Philetus swerving from the truth.

[5 : 33] So what's it going to mean to guard the gospel in the context not only of external pressure, external persecution, but also in the context of the church abandoning the gospel?

I don't know what you think of talk of false teaching within the church. I don't know where you're coming from on that. For some of us, we may hear people talking about false teaching and just think, what on earth is that?

You know, are you telling me that there are versions of Christianity that are not the real thing? Yes. For some of us who perhaps are followers of Jesus, this talk of false teaching and calling it out, it seems so ungenerous, unnecessarily narrow, frankly unloving, and unchristian.

Jesus wouldn't do that, would he? For others of us, we're well aware, painfully aware perhaps, of the existence of false teaching within the church.

And frankly, it causes us to question, what's going on? You know, has God lost control? Is he really in charge? For others of us, if we're really honest, there is a seductive tug towards other kinds of Christianity that are perhaps not so, how can we put it, not so grating, brazen, openly evangelical.

[7 : 07] Perhaps less clearly about this urgent message that Jesus is risen as Lord, he's died for sin, he's coming again, and we must repent.

The message that the Bible clearly teaches. We will all have friends who have gone that way, to an easier version of Christianity. Paul writes to Timothy into this context, and it's the false teaching in Ephesus, it's this chaotic context, I think, that Paul thinks is Timothy's greatest danger.

What is the thing that is most likely to stop Timothy from carrying on in the true gospel? It is the false teaching that he's surrounded by. Two points to Timothy and to us.

Two points today. Number one, don't be naive. False teaching is real and it ruins. And unless we realise this, we will remain naive, spiritually vulnerable, and we won't guard the gospel.

Just look down at 2 verse 14. Paul says, remind them of these things and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good but only ruins the hearers.

[8 : 25] Verse 16, 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.

What's going on in the Ephesian church? The Ephesian church is full of ideas, full of teaching, full of leaders saying theological things.

But Paul calls it irreverent babble. Now, don't get the wrong idea. He's not saying that people were standing up and just going blah, blah, blah, babble, babble, babble.

It didn't sound like irreverent babble. Otherwise, Paul wouldn't have had to write to Timothy to tell him that it is irreverent babble. Far more likely, it sounded clever, spiritual, and persuasive.

Which is why, of course, it was spreading so successfully within the church. It wouldn't be spreading if it didn't sound persuasive. These quarrels about words in verse 14, I take it, would have been presented as intelligent-sounding arguments, inviting people to reconsider whether the plain and obvious meaning of this word, of this text, is really the right one.

[9 : 50] detailed reappraisal. It was a clever-sounding complexity. Detailed reappraisals, papers being published, perhaps, of the meaning of words in Scripture. You probably know the kind of thing.

Perhaps it was a clever-sounding complexity. It sounded reverent, and it was selling well on the Christian bookshelves in Ephesus. It was spreading.

But Paul says, in fact, it is irreverent babble. Well, what's its impact? Well, gangrene is not a flattering description.

Gangrene is a disease that rots the flesh and still cannot be stopped. And so, what we have here is that from the very beginning, the very beginning, there have been kinds of Christian teaching that are not life-giving, but life-sucking, that are not church-building, but church-destroying, that are not faith-building, but faith-destroying, and that can spread like gangrene.

Fast. Successful. through the church. Isn't it striking, as Paul waited to die, he watched on as much of the church became infected with different gospels that destroyed faith.

[11 : 20] We get an insight into one of them with, in verse 17, with Hymenaeus and Philetus. Why does he name them? I think, I take it probably because they are putting, they're the most prominent and successful and attractive teachers within the church and what they're saying is most successful and so they had to be mentioned by name.

But notice what they've done. You see that in verse 18? They've swerved from the truth. It's a really important word, that.

They've not abandoned the truth, or at least they've not walked away from Christianity. They've swerved. 80% of what they were saying was true.

If we had a letter from Hymenaeus circa 65 AD, St. Hymenaeus of Ephesus, we'd no doubt be hearing him talk about Jesus being the Messiah, about sin being forgiven, about Jesus being raised from the dead.

80% of what they were saying was true. But he'd also be emphasising that the resurrection has already happened. This is really important.

[12:39] There's a warning here. Dangerous versions of Christianity can have a lot that is good about them doctrinally. Some great doctrine, but can nevertheless have swerved from the true gospel that Paul taught in such a way, to such an extent, as it wrecks people's faith.

Just because someone talks about the love of God doesn't mean their gospel is the same as Paul's. Hymenaeus and Philetus could have done that. Just because someone talks about the Trinity doesn't mean their gospel is the same as Paul's gospel.

Hymenaeus and Philetus could have done that. Just because someone can recite this, that, or the other creed, even, dare I say, just because somebody can talk about Jesus has died for sin and is raised again, I take it Hymenaeus and Philetus could have done that.

We must be wary. This particular swerve I don't think is coincidental but I think is deliberately recorded for us by the Holy Spirit.

So their swerve in saying that the resurrection has already happened because in every generation we get some version of this. What were they doing in saying that the resurrection, in other words, the resurrection of believers that is promised in the future has already happened.

[14:08] they were bringing what is promised for the future into the present. Now so often that is the step, the first step of different Gospels.

Think about what is known as the prosperity gospel which says if you come to Christ now, yes you will be forgiven and you can believe in Christ for healing, for perfect health, for wealth, for prosperity now.

What is that error? What is that doing? It is bringing what is promised. It's not wrong. It's promised for the future, this glorious new creation where there will be no more suffering or death or disease and wonderful riches.

Bringing that into the present and it wrecks. It wrecks people's faith. It's the same thing in essence for what Hymenaeus and Philetus were doing.

Another example, the early church in 300 to 500 had this thing called Christendom, the Byzantine Empire and the idea there was that actually the kingdom of Christ could be brought into the present through the structures of society and so that we could really live in the kingdom now if the government was set up in a certain way and people believed that you could have the sort of holy Christian empire, that kind of thing.

[15:39] Again, what is that? That's bringing what's promised for the future into the present. It brings the eyes of faithful believers off that final day living for the future hope in eternity which Jesus is so clear about.

Suffering with him now, living for that glorious day and instead it brings the focus onto the here and now and wrecks our faith. And so can I say it is not generous or holy or Christ-like to pretend that everything that goes by the name of Christianity is true.

It's naive. You see that this is the devil's work in verse 26. He's the one who's catching these teachers and snaring them to do his will.

The devil started early on the church within Paul's lifetime. And if we're tempted to think for some reason that the devil who began work in Paul's day is somehow on a cigarette break in our generation where we're being naive.

Of course, he's using all kinds of issues today. One issue, the issue of the day, sexuality, as one of the ways in which he's bringing gangrene into the church.

[17:03] Don't be naive about false teaching. Not every church you walk into will teach the true life-giving gospel, the gospel that Paul taught.

Can I just add, don't be naive about the early church. I think this is quite important. Sometimes, there is a strange kind of automatic authority given to Christian leaders and their writings just

because they lived near to the time of the apostles.

You familiar with that kind of idea? Actually, the Orthodox church traces its roots back to this guy, Saint Ignatius, who was in 100 AD and gets much of its theology from Ignatius.

But the assumption is that proximity to the apostles equals faithfulness. But hang on a second, before Paul died, a whole generation of Christian leaders had walked away from him.

So when you're reading the writings of Ignatius AD 100, how do you know you're not reading the letter of Saint Hymenaeus of Ephesus?

[18 : 21] Proximity to the apostles in time is no guarantee of faithfulness. don't be naive about the Orthodox church. Don't be naive about the Catholic church.

The Catholic church, the teaching of the Catholic church has swerved from Paul's gospel. Paul's gospel of salvation through faith in Christ alone.

The Catholic church insisting on the need for a human priest in order for salvation. it is a swerve. There's lots that's good in the Catholic church doctrine.

But that does not mean that it's a safe doctrine. It doesn't mean that it's not false teaching. It has spread like gangrene and it's done very well. But success is no indication of faithfulness.

This all raises the question, in this context, what was Timothy to do? And that brings us to our second point. What was Timothy to do? He was to be the good among the bad.

[19 : 25] This is my best effort to summarize what Paul says throughout these verses, to be the good among the bad. Paul compares the church to a great house. Just look down at verse 20.

Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honourable use, some for dishonourable. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonourable, he will be a vessel for honourable use, set aside apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.

What's going on here? We're suddenly finding ourselves in the world of Downton Abbey and the picture of a great house and there's a simple distinction that Paul's making. In every great house you have precious china and gold and silver for honourable use and then you've also got the bin and the toilet brush all in the same house.

The point Paul is making to Timothy is that the visible church, what goes by the name of church, will be like this great house.

It will be a mix. Messy. Brings a new meaning to messy church for those of us who are aware of that movement.

[20 : 46] some will truly be God's people, others won't. Some will be faithful teachers, others won't.

Some will be useful to the Lord, others won't. This is the visible church. Paul says don't worry about this Timothy, it's normal.

This is what it's going to be like in this age before the end, before Christ returns. It doesn't take God by surprise. Look at verse 19, God's firm foundation stands.

Paul's encouraging Timothy that in amongst all of this mess don't be deceived. God's firm foundation stands. In other words, the true church, his building project cannot be affected by this, it stands, and the Lord knows who are his.

Among this mess, the Lord knows who are his. And those who are his are the good among the bad, those who depart from iniquity, which includes departing from this false teaching.

[21 : 57] And so Paul says to Timothy, be the good among the bad. You're never going to change the visible church. It's going to be the same from this day until Christ returns.

Your job, Timothy, be the good among the bad. Make sure you're the vessel for honorable use, verse 21. And that raises the question, what does that look like for Timothy?

What sort of leaders therefore should we want? Three words, avoid, teach, pursue. Firstly, avoid, and you'll see that Timothy is supposed to avoid this false teaching.

Verse 16, avoid irreverent babble, and then again verse 23, have nothing to do with this. Now I think this is counterintuitive. You'd think Paul would say, get stuck in there, Timothy.

Get your theological fists out and defend the gospel. Well, we've got to think about what he means by avoid.

[23 : 02] I don't think Paul is saying to Timothy, stick your fingers in your ear and close your eyes and pretend there's nothing happening because of verse 14, he says, charge them to stop this quarrelling. And secondly, if you'll see, you'll notice that little phrase in verse 25, correcting his opponents publicly, privately, naming them if necessary.

So to avoid them and to have nothing to do with these debates and controversies doesn't mean to ignore them completely, but it does mean, I take it, a certain distance from them.

Timothy is certainly not to adopt this irreverent babble, this false teaching, but also he's not to engage in the debates, verse 23. He's not to throw himself into the arena to get his intellectual gloves off.

That's not his work. He's not to get distracted by that. Rather, he's to stand to the side, dignified, not allowing the word of God which is clear, to be dragged down into the pit of these debates and controversies.

He's to stand to the side, to be willing to correct gently, but not to be willing to be dragged in, not to be distracted. So firstly, avoid, secondly, teach.

[24 : 33] Instead, Timothy is to teach the Bible. The way that he's to react to false teaching and this context is to get on with the work of teaching the Bible.

And you can see that in verse 15. 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.

Timothy, just get on with teaching the Bible. Don't be distracted. Notice he's to present himself to God. not to man.

So Timothy is not to work for the approval of man, but for the approval of God, so that on the last day he will have no need to be ashamed before God of how he handled and treated God's word. And so therefore we don't want leaders who are living for our approval. That's a really bad idea. Or who are concerned with what we think of their teaching.

[25 : 33] we want leaders who are presenting themselves to God, whose primary concern is to deliver what God is saying in his word, whatever we might think.

Those are the leaders we want. Those are the leaders who are going to be good for us. We might pray for our leaders that they wouldn't be concerned of our opinion, but only of God's. truth. And those words rightly handling, as Benji mentioned, literally come from a word meaning to cut a straight path for.

So if you ever played at the beach, which I'm assuming most of us have, tried to dig that channel as the sea is coming in, a nice straight channel, that's the idea.

You might dig a straight trench for a flow of water. Cutting a straight path for the word of truth, therefore allowing it to flow where it wants to flow.

[26 : 30] In other words, the faithful Christian leader is called not to manipulate the word of God, the Bible, off into a course that deviates from what it actually says. That's what Hymenaeus and Philetus are doing.

But by contrast, Timothy is to be unashamed of the word of truth and simply to act as a conduit and a channel for it. And so, I take it.

The idea, therefore, is that the faithful leader will devote themselves to saying and teaching what the Bible actually says and not what they think it should say or what they would like it to say or what might win them an audience, a big church or a podium.

It's why, by the way, we talk about expository, not impository teaching. I did look up the word impository. I wasn't sure if it's a word, but it is apparently. Impository is when you impose.

So, expository, this is the idea here. Timothy's job, expose what the scriptures say. Don't impose what you think they should.

[27 : 41] Well, that is the leader who will be the one who can stand unashamed before God on that last day, not the leader with the biggest church, not the leader with the most success necessarily or anything like that. the leader who has rightly handled the word of truth.

It's going to be difficult. People will leave church because of it. It's going to mean suffering for it. It's going to be all the harder because surrounded by so-called Christian leaders who won't do it, but it's going to be worth it.

So, Timothy, be the good among the bad. What kind of Christian leader do you want? Do you want Hymenaeus? Or do you want a Timothy who is patiently faithfully expounding the Bible, not swerving to the left or to the right?

Can I just add how narrow Timothy would have seemed in Ephesus to do this? Refusing to engage in these very popular debates, correcting people publicly, how narrow he would have seemed, telling people to stop, getting on with teaching the Bible.

Well, thirdly, pursue, and this is really important, briefly, but really important, pursue godliness. Vitality, in all of this, Timothy, is to pursue godliness, verse 22.

[29 : 00] Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Paul fleshes this out in verse 24, the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents, yes, but with gentleness.

I take it this above all is about love, not bitterness, pride, or triumphalism. How easy it would be to get bitter or proud, thinking, I've got the truth, and then a hatred to develop, towards those causing the trouble.

I'm definitely guilty of this. But no, these are wonderful words, aren't they? Timothy, love, gentleness, kindness to everyone, including them, including Hymenaeus and Philetus, and a desire for them to be brought out of the snare of the devil.

Do you see that? God may perhaps grant them repentance, compassion, temptation. No triumphalism, Timothy, no pride, patiently enduring whatever flack or criticism comes back to him, which it will, for being so narrow, patiently enduring that, responding with kindness, not quarrelsome, letting others have the last word.

It's a beautiful picture, isn't it, of a leader who is firm about the truth, yes, but who is godly, compassionate, kind, gentle. He's to be the good among the bad.

[30 : 49] So as we conclude, I wonder what you think of all this. If we're not church leaders, take it that's the case for most of us, not all of these commands are directly for us, but as we breathe the air of 2 Timothy, that's what we're doing, as a church, we're breathing the air of 2 Timothy, we will grow wiser in three ways.

Number one, we won't be naive about the reality of gangrene in the church today. It's not holy, generous, or kind to pretend it's not the case. The devil is not on a cigarette break in our generation. He's at work, expect it. But secondly, we won't be discouraged. God's firm foundation stands, nothing's gone wrong, and the winds of false teaching will never be able to affect God's plans. God's true church is taking shape. Nothing can stop him. He's not confused. He knows who are his. And thirdly, we will understand what kind of leaders we need, both personally, so that we might keep going in the faith.

And secondly, as we seek to play our part in guarding the gospel in our generation, we need the good among the bad, the Timothy, who avoids, who gets on with teaching the Bible, and who pursues godliness.

[32 : 18] Let's pray. Father in heaven, we thank you that the true gospel of grace, of Jesus Christ, of faith in him, is the gospel that gives life.

Thank you for his death on the cross for sin. Thank you for his resurrection to defeat death. Thank you for his return, which we wait for. And we ask that you would enable us to continue in the same old gospel that we know and love.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.