

An Approved Worker

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 21st of January 2001.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled An Approved Worker and is from 2 Timothy 2, verses 14 to 26.

Be seated and you may like to have open the first Bible reading from 2 Timothy chapter 2. It's page 967 in the Bibles in front of you. Page 967 and this is part of a sermon series from the beginning of the year for the next few weeks through the letter of 2 Timothy.

Some people think that the way to read the Bible is you open it randomly, see what it says and then do what it says. You can get into trouble though if you do that. One person opened the Bible randomly and he read these words.

Ahithophel set his house in order and hanged himself. He thought, oh, I don't like that. Maybe God's got another word for me. I'll open it more towards the back in the New Testament and that might be a bit more encouraging.

[1 : 16] So he did that and he read, go and do likewise. If you're not careful, you see, Bible reading could be dangerous. In 1996 there was a book that was published by Michael Droznan, it was a bestseller sadly, called The Bible Code.

And in it what he did was basically play word games with the Bible. He looked at the first five books of the Bible, he listed every letter in the Hebrew because that's what it was written in originally and then he started looking for patterns.

For example, every third letter of the first verse of the Bible, sorry, every fifth letter, gives you the word Noah. I don't think that's very significant. I think it's probably just a coincidence.

But he started to do that in the bigger patterns, every 11th letter and 18th letter and 30,000th letter. And of course, if you do that often enough with every combination forwards and backwards, you can find Clinton and Shakespeare and Yitzhak Rabin.

And you could probably find Paul Barker and most of your names for that matter if you look carefully enough. And then of course he builds up prophecies from it predicting that the world would end in 2000. Stupid fool.

[2 : 26] He also hedged his bets and said it might be 2006 but it seems to me if the Bible's going to be clear about something, it's going to be clear and you can't really hedge your bets anyway about what year the world's going to end.

In the end, what he did was just treat the Bible as a great big word puzzle. Like those blocks of letters where you try and find words diagonally or vertically or horizontally.

In effect, that's what he's doing. And he's making the Bible say what he wants it to say. And sadly, the book was a bestseller. And even sadder, it confuses people and misleads them and leads them into wrong things about God.

Similarly, an Australian scholar in recent years has published a few books. There have been bestsellers, denying the resurrection, denying all sorts of things about Jesus, linking him to priests of righteousness or men of wickedness and so on.

Her name was Barbara Thiering. Quite a notorious person in some respects. But the saddest thing is not only the money they make out of bestselling books that are rubbish, but it's misleading people.

[3 : 30] Leading people away from the truth of the Bible. Now, there are extreme examples, I guess. But there are plenty of examples that are closer to home. People who are regarded as respectable Christian leaders or preachers, maybe they're in a pulpit somewhere in this country at this very minute.

And they're wrangling over words, distorting the clear truth of the Bible. And the result is that they're misleading the people who are listening. For example, the Anglican Archbishop of Perth is very elusive in the way that he uses his words to describe what is true in the Bible.

So much so that people doubt whether he believes that Jesus rose from the dead. I happen to think that he probably did, but friends of mine who've read him and heard him think that he didn't.

The point at this point is not so much what he believes, but it's the confusion that he engenders in the listeners. By playing around with words and distorting the clear statements of the Bible, what he does is confuse people and mislead people.

He's one of many examples, I would guess. There are many preachers, too many preachers, who are really peddling confusion and doubt when they explain the Bible.

[4 : 48] Now, that's not a new phenomenon. It's not just something that happened in the latter part of the 20th century. It was there in the 60s AD when Nero was the emperor of Rome. In a church at a place called Ephesus in what is modern-day Turkey, St. Paul had founded the church.

He's now in prison in Rome and the church is being looked after by one of his protégés, a man called Timothy. And this letter to Timothy is a letter from Paul to Timothy, who is looking after the church in Ephesus in modern-day Turkey.

And Paul is exhorting Timothy to stand firm against those who are misleading and confusing the people. So he says at the first verse of today's Bible reading, remind them of this and warn them before God, this is a serious warning, that they are to avoid wrangling over words which does no good but only ruins those who are listening.

He's saying to Timothy, avoid the false teachers who are wrangling over words, distorting truth, confusing, misleading the people who are listening.

Indeed, it is ruining them, he says. In verse 16, he describes them as people who are involved in profane chatter. And then in verse 23, they're involved with stupid and senseless controversies that are quarrelsome.

[6 : 15] They're the false teachers and the only hint we get of what they're actually teaching is given to us in verses 17 and 18. He says, among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus who have swerved from the truth by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place.

It doesn't mean they're the resurrection of Jesus, that had taken place, but rather the resurrection of Christians as though that had already taken place. We don't know how they said that, possibly some spiritualising of it as though the resurrection of Christians is not a bodily resurrection to heaven but is just some sort of eternal spirit that will live on.

Nothing new in that. It's happening all the time today. Now in contrast to those false teachers, the wranglers over words, the ones involved in stupid and senseless controversies, Paul gives Timothy these words in verse 15.

This is the heart really of this passage. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by Him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

Now when he says do your best, the idea behind that is of effort, sustained effort and zeal to accomplish your best. The old translations would say study to show yourself approved.

[7 : 38] That is it involves effort and determination, some sort of perseverance and sustaining yourself as one seeking to keep on trying to do your best before God.

He describes that person, what Timothy is to strive to be, as a worker who has no need to be ashamed, a labourer, somebody who expends sweat and toil in their work.

Now it's an unusual way to describe somebody who's dealing with scripture. Often people think that the white collar workers or the people with the suits, they've got a cushy job. They're not expending lots of effort and sweat of the brow.

But Timothy is to be a worker in the Bible who is one that's expending that effort, the sweat and the toil of struggling with scripture to rightly explain it.

And that expression at the end of that verse, to rightly explain the word of truth, is an intriguing one. It's used in the ancient world to describe people who make roads.

[8 : 41] And you may know that the Romans were famous and still are for their straight roads. If you go to Britain, you can travel down some old Roman roads that are very straight. The word is used to cut a straight road, a straight path.

Here, I think what Paul has in mind is not just rightly explaining it, but is in a sense explaining scripture in a straightforward way, in a clear way, a simple way, not a devious or confusing or

misleading way.

But scripture fundamentally is clear, so he's saying a right interpretation or explanation of it will be straightforward, clear to follow. That's what Timothy is to be like, not confusing people or misleading them by wrangling over words.

Now he also says in that verse that Timothy is not to be ashamed of rightly handling the word of truth. That's an intriguing thing to say because why would somebody be ashamed of rightly handling the word of truth, the gospel or the scriptures that is?

We've already seen a number of times in this letter the emphasis on not being ashamed. Paul exhorted Timothy back in chapter 1 verse 8 not to be ashamed of the gospel and of Paul.

[9 : 56] He commends on a cyphras at the end of chapter 1 for not being ashamed of the gospel and of Paul. And Paul himself declares about himself in prison that I am not ashamed of the gospel and of God.

Why should Timothy be ashamed of rightly handling the word of truth? It may be because it might lead him to suffering and death such as what Paul is facing.

And we know that later in his life Timothy was in prison. And in the days when Nero was emperor, as in the days after Nero was emperor, Christians for speaking the truth about the gospel and about the Bible could find themselves suffering or in prison.

Therefore, they could be ashamed of that and tempted not to speak the word of truth accurately. It may be because there's some perceived embarrassment about being allied with Paul who's in prison.

The false teachers, it seems, would say to Timothy and those who are listening to what he said, don't follow their gospel. Look where it's ended up for Paul. He's in prison. Aren't you ashamed of being associated with somebody who's languishing in a Roman jail?

[11 : 05] So Paul is saying, don't be ashamed of rightly explaining the word of truth. Don't be embarrassed by that. But it also might be because the word of truth, the Bible or the gospel, is not often welcomed by its listeners.

Paul's going to elaborate that on a bit later in chapter four, which we'll see in a few weeks time. But the gospel doesn't flatter us. The gospel doesn't sort of pander to our egos.

The gospel actually takes the carpet from under our feet, but it tells us that salvation is entirely God's work and we contribute nothing to it. Now, when we hear a message like that, on the one hand, it's wonderful words of grace because God's done it all for us.

But on the other hand, by and large, listeners tend to reject it because we don't like being told that we're spiritually bankrupt. It's easy to be embarrassed by the truth of the Bible because it doesn't flatter people and pander to their egos.

Now, the same thing happens today, I think. There are pressures and temptations on Christian leaders and preachers to be ashamed of rightly handling the word of truth.

[12 : 15] For example, preachers today are often ashamed of the exclusive claims of Jesus that he alone is the way, the truth and the life and it's only through faith in him alone that anyone can find salvation.

And in our society, which says every road's going to lead to God, pick and choose, it's a smorgasbord of religions, we can easily feel ashamed of the truths of Jesus that are exclusive.

Or to put it another way, preachers today are often, I think, ashamed of the moral stance of the Bible. It is clear morally what we are to be like in our attitude to money, to work, in relationships, sexual morality and in all sorts of other ways.

Now, in our very promiscuous sort of society, it is easy to feel ashamed for rightly handling the word of truth morally. An example of that in recent days has been the play that's on in Melbourne, Corpus Christi.

It's a play that portrays Jesus as gay and in a gay relationship. And Christians have come out against the play calling it for to be censored and banned and protesting outside and those in favour of the play have been writing back letters to the editor in the age and so on.

[13 : 34] But one of the effects of all that is that it is easy to feel ashamed of the Bible's moral stance on that issue. And it's easy perhaps to shut up and feel a bit embarrassed that the Bible is so counter to our society.

Sometimes we can feel ashamed because the Bible talks about miracles that God does and our world tends to denounce or ridicule miracles. We can feel embarrassed that Scripture is so

confident about who God is and what He's like and what He's on about.

It's much easier to be unknowing, ignorant about God in our society. Paul knows all too well the pressures that are on preachers to in a sense play down their confidence of Scripture and not rightly handle the word of truth.

And those pressures exist today as they did then. That's why he describes Timothy as a workman, a worker. Because you've got to work hard in the faces of all sorts of temptations and pressures rightly to handle the word of truth.

The hardest part of my week is Saturday night. I hate Saturday nights. Anguishing over Bible passages that I'm preaching on the next morning, trying to get it right, trying to get it relevant, trying to explain it correctly, straightforwardly.

[14:54] It is hard work and I agonise almost every week. But the reason to get it right is crucial. We're not just playing about with words here.

We are playing about with people's lives and the stakes are high for getting a word of truth rightly handled and explained. So Paul said in verse 14 that those false teachers who are wrangling with words are leading others to ruin.

They're not leading them into some nice life. They're leading them to ruin. In verse 16 when he talks of them involved in profane chatter he says it will lead more and more people rather into more and more impiety, ungodliness, immoral behaviour that is.

The stakes are high. He goes on to say that such talk in verse 17 is gangrenous. That's a fairly vivid way to describe the effect of false teaching. It's not just that people believe the wrong things but by doing the wrong things they end up with gangrene spiritually and gangrene that spreads within themselves and within others and will ultimately lead to death.

It's no coincidence you see that false teaching and immorality actually go together and where false teaching abounds immorality will abound as well.

[16:17] One example the most notorious Anglican bishop in the world in recent years has been a bishop in Newark John Spong. You still see him on television just the other week or two I think.

He doesn't believe very much indeed about the Bible at all. It's no coincidence that he's actually writing articles for a pornographic website. False teaching and immorality go together and that's what Paul is expressing here.

False teachers are wrangling with words but they're leading people to ruin through ungodliness and their life will lead to spiritual death. So the stakes are high for rightly handling the word of truth.

Truth and morals go together. This is a life and death matter you see. On the one hand you can swerve from the truth but literally you end up in a dead end.

On the other hand Timothy is exhorted to straightforwardly rightly handle the word of truth. You swerve away from it to death or you pursue it straightforwardly and you find what Paul said at the very beginning of the letter the promise of life.

[17:28] The work that I do as a preacher on scripture during the week to rightly handle it is worth the effort though there's pressure not to do it all the time.

For Phil when you go to Fentree Gully the same pressures will be there but heed what Paul says to Timothy do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him a worker who has no need to be ashamed rightly explaining the word of truth.

And when you're under attack maybe even in an overwhelmed sense lots of opposition it can be easy to doubt whether you're actually standing on the truth or not especially when you're in a minority position.

In the Old Testament Moses was in a situation like that he was the leader of the people of Israel in the wilderness and a sort of deputation came to him to instigate a coup in effect led by a man called Korah and they challenged Moses' leadership and Moses said okay let God decide God will distinguish between me and you and if he chooses you then you will be the leaders and God intervened and Korah and his compatriots were killed in God's judgment fairly severely mind you but very clearly now Paul alludes to that incident in verse 19 because he quotes loosely twice from that incident in Numbers chapter 16 he says to Timothy firstly words of assurance God's firm foundation stands bearing this inscription the picture is of God's church as a building and the other day walking through the city in the Bourke Street Mall you can see inscribed in effect on the building in the old bricks

Buckley and Nun not very helpful these days because it's gone the signs there but if you go inside you find that it's David Jones these days not Buckley and Nun but that's the model or the image that

Paul's using here an inscription on a building which is the church and he's saying firstly the first thing that's inscribed is a seal of ownership the Lord knows those who are his just as with Moses against Korah God knew who were his Moses and not Korah and therefore punish them so too Timothy can be assured that as Timothy stands firm against false teachers they will not prevail because God knows who are his there is a seal of ownership on them the Lord knows those who are his Timothy can be assured that even if he's in a minority he stands firm in God's truth and God knows and distinguishes the difference but the flip side of God's ownership is the response of obedience and that's the second quote in verse 19 let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness now that in a sense becomes the second of the two main things [20 : 26] Timothy's exhorted to do in this passage one is to be a right handler of the word of truth the other is to turn away from wickedness he's to handle the words the truth correctly but he's also to handle his life of morality correctly as well so Paul gives an illustration in verses 20 and 21 in a large house there are utensils not only of gold and silver but also of wood and clay some for special use some for ordinary all who cleanse themselves of the things I've mentioned will become special utensils dedicated and useful to the owner of the house ready for every good work no doubt when somebody important comes for dinner you get out your royal dalton you put away your Johnson sort of stoneware and you get out your best china Paul's saying a similar analogy here in homes you've got two things you've got your ordinary utensils but you've got your silver cutlery and your royal dalton china or something like that you get out the best for the best purposes he's saying in effect to Timothy turn from wickedness what that means is don't just in a sense be an ordinary Christian although ordinary Christians are meant to turn from wickedness but in particular as a leader and preacher if you are set apart for a special purpose for a special use like your royal dalton china above any other Christian you must be morally right turned away from wickedness cleansed from impurity now all Christians have that obligation to obedience but there is a greater accountability for Christian leaders here

Paul acknowledges that in his own life in other places in the New Testament here he's applying it to Timothy if you are to be a leader of God's people there is a special accountability to turn away from wickedness and to be cleansed from impurity and what it means in practice for Timothy is spelled out in the final verses of this chapter Paul goes on to say in verse 22 shun youthful passions we've probably all got ideas about what youthful passions are not necessarily sexual it's just general desires Paul doesn't elaborate on them and we'd be well to be cautious about what we think they are but by contrasting them with what follows in that verse youthful passions are things that do not bring righteousness faith peace and love whatever they are they are things that lead away from righteousness faith peace and love so shun youthful passions he says and pursue righteousness faith peace and love is what he says in verse 22 there's good pastoral wisdom here because all of us whether youthful or not have ungodly desires and passions from time to time whether it's to do with greed or covetousness or sexual lust or whatever it is we all have passions and desires that are wrong the pastoral wisdom here is how do you deal with them do you flirt with them no Paul says flee do you try and concentrate on them and subdue them no Paul says shun them but he gives the positive alternative don't just flee and shun but pursue righteousness faith peace and love that is he gives the positive direction to pursue as well as the negative direction to flee now it's good wisdom there if we're grappling with some desire or pressure that is ungodly in some ways we're better off not concentrating on it and trying to dampen it down but fleeing it by pursuing the right virtues in its place that's Paul's wisdom here for Timothy so what are needed then for Christian ministers are two basic things right handling of the word of truth and right living and both of those are combined in the way Timothy must approach the false teachers Paul says in verse 23 have nothing to do with them but then he goes on to say notice there the emphasis on correction and apt teaching you've got to get it correct because truth matters but there's also an emphasis there on being kind and gentle and patient with your opponents because people matter truth matters and people matter so putting the right words and the right living together matters before God Paul's concern with the opponents is that they he says at the end of verse 25 will repent and come to know the truth he's not dismissing the opponents false teaching though they're heretics and not Christians but rather he's saying to Timothy your approach to them must be to correct them but in gentleness patience and love so that they may repent and come back to the word of truth there is a love for people there and a love for truth sometimes you meet Christians who are so full of love they're so welcoming that they seem never to stand for anything about truth at all truth is tossed out

the window and the cause of the gospel has not been helped by those people but on the other hand sometimes we meet people who are so dogmatic about the details of truth that they have no love for anybody at all and the gospel's not helped by those people either there's a story of a man who is a wonderful preacher that he preached so well but lived so badly that when he was in the pulpit his people didn't want him to get out of it and when he was out of the pulpit they didn't want him to get into it truth and love together is what qualifies a person for the ministry that Paul is exhorting Timothy to do here every Christian minister needs that same combination even the vicars of Fentry Gully and especially the vicars of Doncaster but it's not exclusive to the vicars and ministers and clergy it is something for all Christians for whilst Timothy is to be above all Christians above reproach in his living and his handling of scripture the same things are true for all of us if we're Christian to rightly handle God's word and to turn away from wickedness and pursue righteousness faith, peace and love the same obligations on each one of us whether in ministry or not we do well to heed these words each day

Amen condemn and do for them in the best future and above all this who's waking up that's the mercy of God with our people and he's leaving a ■ and their children and of our children have to step in 9221 to ■■ a really bad Shir ■■ Thank you.