



## Be a Diligent Workman

SERIES: *A Life That Counts: Studies in 2 Timothy*

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Recently a friend recommended I read a best-selling novel called, *The DaVinci Code*. It's a fictional work about a secret organization called the Priory of Sion, which at one time really did exist, and which celebrates what they call the "sacred feminine," which essentially is goddess worship. In the book, the Priory of Sion is the keeper of an ancient secret which is substantiated by treasured documents they've kept in hiding for centuries. It's a secret that calls into question the truth of the Bible and identity of Jesus as God's true Son. These ancient documents prove that Jesus in fact bore a child with Mary Magdalene and their royal bloodline continues today. The Priory of Sion keeps these documents hidden from the church, with the intention of one day revealing to the world the truth about Mary and Jesus and the myth of Christianity.

As you might imagine, it's quite a read! The sad thing is that there is just enough reality in the book to give the whole thing an aura of truth. No doubt there are people who believe this stuff. Even those who consider themselves Christians have wondered if this might call everything they believe into question. This is an extreme example of the kind of false teaching that can creep into our thinking and erode our confidence in the truth. How do you deal with that?

Usually it's more subtle. Last weekend I was in San Diego with my daughter's soccer team. As we were having dinner with the parents one of the couples and I began to talk about our beliefs. These folks are members of a mainline denomination. They go to church. Their kids are in the youth group. But they've been taught that all religions are basically the same. It doesn't matter whether you're a Buddhist or a Moslem or a Mormon; it's all the same.

It sounds good. It sounds so accepting, so reasonable, so enlightened. How do you deal with that without coming off as ignorant or mean spirited?

These were the kinds of issues that Timothy faced in the church at Ephesus. Ironically, Ephesus was the home of the Temple of Diana, a center of goddess worship. If that wasn't enough, there were influential teachers within that fellowship who taught that the resurrection of the dead had already taken place. The Bible teaches that when Christ returns the dead in Christ will be raised up and join him in the air. The Bible calls that our blessed hope. But these folks taught a spiritual

resurrection. Of course, there is some truth in this. When a nonbeliever becomes a Christian he's baptized into the death and resurrection of our Lord. Spiritually, we die with him and we're raised with him to new life. But these folks taught that this spiritual resurrection that you experienced when you were born again is all the resurrection there is going to be.

How would Timothy deal with that sort of teaching? Starting in 2 Timothy 2:14, Paul comes along side Timothy and tells him several things he must do in dealing with this problem.

### 1. Be **DIRECT** in charging people not to fight over words.

The first thing Timothy must do is be very direct. Look at v. 14.

**"Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless and leads to the ruin of the hearers."**

Paul uses two commands here, both dealing with Timothy's responsibility to be very direct in confronting the church about these issues. He's to do that by continually reminding them of the truths of the gospel. Sometimes preachers get tired of saying the same things. We try to be innovative. Paul says, "It's not about innovation, it's about affirmation." Affirm the truth over and over again. But that's not all. He's to also solemnly warn them that they should cease fighting about words. He's to do that in the presence of God. In other words, God is your witness. God himself is speaking through you.

Apparently, the false teachers were engaged in disputes about words. That still happens. A book came out a few years ago called *The Bible Code*, which says that as God dictated the first five books of the Old Testament, he enclosed prophecies in a skip code - that is, every fifth letter in a sentence forms a word. The Code is so complex you need a computer to decipher it, but once you figure it out, you can know the future. It sounds silly, but people get caught up in these kinds of word games.

In Ephesus, the church had divided up on two sides, with each group defending their position based on the meaning of a few words. There are groups today which do the same thing. I know of one group who calls themselves the International Church of Christ. Much of

what they stand for is right on, but they have this thing about baptism. They believe that for a baptism to be genuine, it must be done "in the name of Jesus." If you were baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, that's not a genuine baptism. You have to get the words right. These are the things we're to avoid - word battles.

Paul says two things about word battles. Two reasons to stay away from them. First, they're useless. Like chewing on cardboard, they get you tired but they add no nourishment to your soul. If you've ever seen people fight over these things it is very evident that these word battles really don't produce any further light on an issue. Usually they make us proud. We like using words others don't know the meaning of; we like showing off our knowledge.

The second reason is that "it leads to the ruin of the hearers." The word *ruin* here is literally the word, "catastrophe." This kind of thing is catastrophic to those who are listening and watching and are easily led astray. Ray Stedman tells about a church that got into a major battle over whether to have a Christmas tree in the church building. One faction contended that Christmas trees were of pagan origin, so to have one in the church would be wrong. The other group thought that having one was merely a pleasant custom which they had grown up with since childhood, and there was nothing wrong with the practice. That side got a tree, decorated it and set it up in the church basement. When the other faction arrived, they grabbed the tree, lights and all, and dragged it out into the parking lot. The other faction then took the tree and dragged it back into the church. A big fight resulted, right outside the church doors, and somebody had to call the police! The police came and locked the doors, and all this was spread in the paper the next day.

That's the kind of thing that can happen when we engage in word battles. Paul tells us today to be very direct about this. But it's not enough just to be direct with others. Timothy would also need to be diligent with regard to his own life.

## **2. Be DILIGENT in presenting yourself approved to God.**

**"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (v.15).**

Timothy is to be diligent. The word suggests that he's to do his very best and he is to do it with passion and zeal. I think of a high school student trying to get into a major university. He's careful to take the right classes. He studies night and day to ensure his G.P.A. is high. He involves himself in extra curricular

activities - sports and student government. He takes extra courses to prepare for the SAT. He knows that the time will come when he'll present his application to several schools. A committee will carefully inspect his work. He wants to be approved; he wants to be accepted. Timothy is to work with that kind of passion and diligence and purpose. Paul calls him a "workman." As a workman he knows that the day will come when his work will be inspected, not by a college entrance committee, but by God. So he's to work hard with the intention of presenting himself and his work to God without shame. Timothy wasn't to concern himself with man's approval or even with the church's approval, but with God's approval.

You say, "Well, that sounds like salvation by works." But this is not about salvation; this is about commendation. Having been saved by grace through faith, this is about living a life that is pleasing to him. Paul says, **"We have this as our ambition...to be pleasing to him"** (2 Cor. 5:9).

Now, for Timothy and for all those who are called to preach and teach the Scriptures, the mark of a good workman is to "handle accurately the word of truth." The word that Paul uses here is a very unique one. It is the word orthotomeo. We get our words orthopedics and orthodontics from these words. The idea is to put something straight. Orthotomeo means "to cut straight." Timothy is to "cut straight the word of truth." Scholars have struggled as to what Paul means here. Some have thought he meant a plowman who sets his eye on an object at the end of a field, and he plows a straight course right to that object. According to that view, Paul was suggesting that Timothy is to plow a straight course through the word of truth. Others have thought Paul was referring to the way a stonemason builds a wall: he drops a plumb line, then he is careful to cut the stone so it is straight according to the line. Perhaps the best explanation is that Paul is referring to his own work as a tentmaker. Timothy probably worked many nights with him, cutting and sewing material together to make tents. If you've made clothes from patterns you know how important it is to cut the material straight. If you cut it on a line away from what the pattern says you'll end up with a piece that's either too small or too large. That may be what Paul is talking about. When you handle the Scriptures, be sure to cut a straight line. Don't be sloppy; be accurate, be careful. When you cut a straight line through the word of truth your teaching will be straight forward.

There was a school of thought that was troubling the church at the time Paul wrote this letter called Gnosticism. It was a system of philosophy, producing a lot of long words that attempted to make the Christian life a complex, philosophical theory rather than an adventure of faith. It was robbing the Christian faith of its simplicity. This is what Paul is concerned about: "Timothy, don't make the word an object of speculation but use it as an

instrument to point people to Christ and encourage them to godliness. Keep your exposition simple so that it's readily understood and obeyed." A workman who fails to do this will leave people muddled and confused.

There is a story about the late Professor Paul Tillich. The story tells of certain people who appear before the gates of heaven. The archangel was standing before the gates. The first person to appear was Peter. The angel asked him, "Peter, who do you say that Jesus is?" Peter said, "He is the Christ, the Son of the living God." To which the archangel responded, "Enter into his rest." A bit later Tillich comes down the path. The angel asks him, "Prof. Tillich, who do you say Jesus is?" His response is, "Theologically, he is the Ground of all Being; eschatologically, he's the Ground of all Hope; and existentially, he is the Ground of the Divine-Human Encounter." To which the angel said, "huh?" You see, the result of his instruction is not a more godly person but a more confused one.

The scriptures are designed to lead us into a relationship with God, and his plan is clear, explicit and intelligible. I am not saying that the scriptures are without depth and subtlety. The greatest minds of the past 2000 years have wrestled with their ideas. As Paul says here, it takes hard work; you have to be diligent. For a pastor who takes his call to preach the word seriously it takes 15-20 hours a week to prepare a message. There are guys who don't do that. They're great speakers. They rely on their personality and their ability to think on the fly, but sooner or later that catches up with a man, and people realize he's not doing his homework. So we're to be diligent in handling the word.

Of course, to do that, Timothy will have avoid getting caught up in arguing minutia with these false teachers.

### **3. Be DISCIPLINED in shunning worldly and empty chatter.**

**"But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and they upset the faith of some" (vv.16-18).**

While Timothy pours himself into the word of truth, he's to avoid worldly and empty chatter. He's to avoid getting caught up in the speculations and word games of the false teachers. I think of teachers who focus all their energies on the intricate details of what will happen during the end times. I think of teachers who spend most of their time trying to figure out the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom. I think of teachers who are caught up proving that all the signs and wonders of the

NT ought to be manifest in the church today. The temptation is that this stuff really is fascinating, but it's not edifying. Paul says three things about chatter.

First, he says it leads to progress in ungodliness. Paul is poking fun at the gnostics here who believed they had "progressed" to a higher level of spiritual knowledge. He says what in fact this stuff does is cause them to "progress" in ungodliness. On the other hand, solid teaching is designed to make us more like Christ - more loving, more patient, more holy, more just.

Second, he says such chatter spreads like gangrene. What a vivid picture! Gangrene was the term in those days for a sore that eats into the flesh. It's not a very pretty picture. Take some of the stuff that oozes out of one of those sores and serve it up on some toast. That's what their teaching is like! And the amazing thing is that people eat it up! It spreads. It tickles our minds. It indulges our flesh. It feeds our ego.

Finally, he says at the end of v. 18 that such chatter "upsets the faith of some." He talks specifically about these two men, Hymenaeus and Philetus, who he says had "gone astray from the truth." Instead of cutting it straight, they swerved from it. In Paul's first letter to Timothy he had warned him about Hymanaeus. He was to be put out of the church. But like a bad case of the flu he wouldn't go away, and now he has a new sidekick named Philetus. But it's not so much the false teachers Paul is worried about, it's their victims, whose faith is frail, who might go either way. It reminds me of what Jesus warned about causing what he called his "little ones" to stumble. He said you would be better off to have a millstone tied around your neck and be thrown into the sea than do that.

It's an awesome responsibility Timothy has. It's like Paul says, "*Timothy, in protecting your church from false teaching you should work as if it all depended on you.*" Remember, this is a young, inexperienced man. He's physically frail, he gets sick a lot. He's timid by nature. He hates conflict. He'd rather stay in the background. He'd rather climb under the covers and go back to sleep. And yet so much is being laid on Timothy's shoulders. There is a big leak in the boat and only he can plug it up. Meanwhile, people are jumping ship, eating up the foul pablum of false teachers. How can he do it? I must tell you that this is a question every spiritual leader has faced. It's like it's too much weight to handle. I must tell you that I have felt that from time to time. I've felt that this past year more than ever before. And it's in light of that reality that what Paul says in v. 19 comes like a cool glass of water thirsty soul.

#### 4. Be DISCERNING of God's ultimate judgment.

**“Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness’” (v.19).**

Timothy, he says, the faith of some is being upset. But the foundation itself will never be upset. God himself and the work that he's doing in people's lives will never be overthrown. *You should work as if it all depended on you, but you should rest as if it all depended on God.* His foundation is firm and it stands. What he has founded, of course, is the church, the body of Christ. As Jesus said, the gates of hell will never prevail against that church. Here is something to stand on!

Paul says there are two identifying marks of the church, a twofold seal or inscription. In Paul's day it was common for an owner to place his own seal or inscription on the foundation stone of a building. Paul says God's people have a twofold seal. One is invisible; only God can see it. The other is visible and can be discerned by all.

The invisible seal affirms that the Lord knows those who are his. Jesus said, **“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand”** (Jn. 10:27-28). That's what Timothy needed to remember. God's church is never going to be altered or shaken even when it appears that people are falling by the wayside. God knows those that are his.

But there is also a visible inscription: let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from wickedness. As we proclaim the truth of the word of God we'll see God draw people to himself. As they're drawn into a relationship with him their lives will change and they will begin to depart from sin. I've seen this happen over and over again. It doesn't happen over night. It's a life long process. We're always turning away from some sin that sticks to us like an old barnacle. But when people come to Christ and the Lord begins to work in their lives, there is change. He convicts us of sin. He gives us the desire to be pleasing to him. Our lives begin to change. I spoke to someone this week who said, “I want to repent, but I'm not sure I know what that means.” So I talked to her about how repentance starts within as we change our mind about how we've been living, and then it works its way out into our behavior as we turn and go in a different direction. It was so encouraging because I didn't have to convince her of anything. She was ready and willing.

This firm foundation with its twofold seal is an encouragement to us. Many may be departing from the faith. Many may disregard our message. At times we're tempted to soften it, to accommodate ourselves to the climate of the day. Paul says, No! You be direct in reminding people and warning people to stay on track. You be diligent in cutting a straight path with the word of truth. You be disciplined in avoiding useless controversies. You work as if it all depended on you, but when the day is done you can rest as if it all depended on God. You can rest because the firm foundation of God will always stand. You can rest because the Lord knows those who are his and no one can snatch them out of his hands. And you can rest because all who name the name of Christ will depart from wickedness.