

# Stay on the Path Teaching the Word of Truth

📖 2 Timothy 2:14-19

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We're studying 2 Timothy during this hour. This letter was written by Paul when he was in his final imprisonment in Rome, had already had his first trial and was scheduled for imminent execution because of the gospel. He wrote the letter to Timothy, his protege, who was to take the torch from Paul and continue teaching these things to others so that Christianity continues. There is a human responsibility involved in the propagation and continuation of Christianity. The problem was Timothy was living under Nero's persecutions and he was afraid of being arrested and thrown in prison by the Roman authorities. Paul wrote to convince him that ministering the word of truth is more important than saving your skin. What Paul does in chapter 1 is remind Timothy that he comes from a faithful heritage, both his grandmother Lois and his mother, Eunice, were faithful believers. He also reminds him that he has a spiritual gift of teaching, and that he should be using that gift. He also reminds him that God has given us the Holy Spirit and if we depend on Him then we will be able to guard the sound doctrine He has entrusted to us. He then reminds him of the faithful believer, Onesiphorus, who did not fear persecution or danger. In chapter 2 Paul tells Timothy he has to remain strong in grace that is provided to him by his close connection with Jesus Christ. And that he needs to get back to teaching the word of God, training men who will be competent to train others also. But he doesn't leave him with any false expectations, if he teaches the word it may cause him to suffer hardship. But if he does there's the guarantee of rewards. He uses the illustration of a good soldier, a rule abiding athlete and a hard-working farmer, because all these require perseverance and struggle, but in the end there is reward.

Getting a little more detailed, let's review what Paul said last time in 2:8-13. In 2:8 Paul said to Timothy, "Remember Jesus Christ." Remember that His sufferings gave way to the victorious resurrection from the dead and His future reign as the descendant of David, according to the gospel Paul received from Him on the Damascus Road. The very gospel which in verse 9 Paul says I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal under Rome. But even though he was imprisoned, the word of God is not imprisoned, it can't be locked away. Verse 10, for this reason, Paul endured all things for the sake of those who were distinguished, so that they may hit the mark of salvation in Christ Jesus by gaining eternal glory, accruing to heightened reward status. This is a trustworthy statement as proven by the saying in verses 11-13, for if we die as martyrs in connection with Him,

we will also be raised to live with Him. If we endure persecution, we will also share in His Davidic reign in the kingdom. If we deny Him when opportunities arise to confess Him, He will deny us rewards, but even if we are entirely faithless, He remains faithful to us, to deny us would be to deny Himself. So the *modus operandi* is to persevere whatever hardships we face when it concerns the gospel and the motive is eternal reward.

Today in verse 14 Paul instructs Timothy on how to minister the word. This is very practical and advanced application. Paul says, **Remind them of these things**. The question is, remind who of what things? The answer is his congregation at Ephesus. Paul was pastor of the Church at Ephesus. Remind them of what? **Remind them** of the things in vv 11-13, that if we are martyred with Him, we will be resurrected to live with Him, if we endure persecution, we will also reign with Him, if we deny Him, he will deny us rewards, and if we are faithless, He remains faithful to us, because He cannot deny Himself. Believers need to be reminded of how we should live the Christian life and the rewards for doing so and how even if we fail, He will never fail. Liftin said, "The bulk of preaching to a knowledgeable audience frequently consists of reminding them of what they already know." That's one of the things I struggle with when I teach, coming up with new things to teach you that you don't already know. But it's actually a dangerous thing to try to come up with new things. Everyone is trying to be novel. The word of God is the same yesterday, today and forever. There are not many things new. There is just a lot of things to know. And ultimately, I think there are always new things I am learning, so there are little things here and there every time we meet. But the bulk of what I teach to you is simply reminding you of things you already know. Maybe it slipped to the back of your mind, but here it comes to the fore again and again and this is what we need to be successful in the Christian life, we need to be reminded of the time honored doctrines of the faith. Timothy needed to remind his congregation of these things as well. Further in verse 14 he says, **and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words**. The words **solemnly charge** mean "to exhort with authority in matters of extraordinary importance." It is "frequently" found in the context of a higher power, as here, **in the presence of God** in order to suggest that if you don't there is some peril. The peril is described later in vv 18-19 through the examples of Hymenaeus and Philetus. Timothy was to warn his congregation **not to wrangle about words**. The Greek word translated **wrangle about words** is *λογομαχεω*, and means "to dispute about words, split hairs" (BDAG), "to war about words" (LS), "dispute about trifles" (Zodhiates). The intent of this word is to not argue over things of trifling importance. And the subject matter is things in Scripture. So, this is not arguing about worldly things, things disconnected from Scripture, that's verse 16, this is arguing about Scriptural things that are controversial or debatable. And it is a solemn warning. I want to talk about this for awhile. What I want to talk about is things in Scripture that people make mountains out of, but which are really molehills. And why it's really dangerous to argue about these things and to emphasize these things. I personally have a good history of arguing about every jot and tittle. It about drove my wife crazy. Over time I saw that arguing over trifling things was not valuable. I was hesitant to give up arguing about them because it made me think that maybe I didn't care, but I realized over time that wasn't the case, but the real issue was that I saw it was causing unnecessary division and obfuscation. In other words, you can really become a

wing nut if you do this and you can work yourself into positions that are so removed from people that you are misleading them, and almost certainly in error. Usually an idea comes along and it has its opportunity to undergo evaluation, and after awhile it is either well-accepted or its rejected. If it's rejected, or held by only a small group, they become obscure and irrelevant, except for their small circle. I've seen this in many individuals, most of whom attend no church because they want to argue about their one special issue all the time, and I've seen this in pastors, most of whom either become entirely irrelevant and/or develop an almost cult-like following. One of the books that addressed this subject, that I came to adore was written by Dr John Hannah, long time Church History professor at Dallas Theological Seminary. It's titled, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*. He's the world's leading expert on some figures in Church History, like Charles Wesley. At the very end of his book there are two little sections called "The Centrality of the Gospel in Christian Proclamation" and "The Centrality of Christian Orthodoxy in the Church." I literally keep this book right behind my desk so that I can access these little sections. I do this because what he has to say there is very important for a teaching ministry that glorifies God. (Extensive reading from book)

I think you get the point and it's Paul's point in verse 14, if you **wrangle about words**, which is to argue about trifling things or emphasize them, then Paul says it is **useless**. The Greek says, "in no way is it useful or beneficial." It just has no benefit. It also says it **leads to the ruin of the hearers**. The word **ruin** is the Greek *katastrophes*, from which we get "catastrophe. It means it causes them intellectual catastrophe. A catastrophe usually ruins everything it touches. And the intellectual catastrophe will ruin them intellectually, there is no edification. That's why I always re-evaluate strange doctrines because they are very likely incorrect and I usually reject them and I'm not going to argue about them with people because I find that they are almost cult-like in their adherence to them and there's no benefit to discussing them. The only time I will discuss them is to warn them about how obscure the ideas are and how fringe they are. If they want to go on believing them, fine, but I have good reasons for not believing them and I'm just not going to argue about it. I'll just tell them what I think and why and let them go search the Scriptures themselves. Anything beyond that is a waste of my time.

Let's move on to verse 15, this is a famous little verse, very well-known. Paul says, **Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth**. The meaning of this verse really comes down to the last phrase, so we'll look at that and then come back and see what the full meaning is. The words **word of truth** are clear enough, he's talking about the word of God, the 66 books of the canon of Scripture, 39 OT books and 27 NT books. These are **the word of truth**. It's the word **accurately handling** that gets so much discussion. The KJV translates "rightly dividing," and you've probably heard that expression a lot; rightly dividing the word of truth. The Greek word is *ορθοτομουντα*. It's a compound word from *ορθος* and *τεμνω*. The first part of the word, *ορθος* means "straight." We derive words like orthopedics, "straighten the child," and "orthodontics, "straighten the teeth," from this word. But basically it just means "straight." The other word *τεμνω* means "to cut." Putting the two together, the etymology of the word is "to cut straight." The word is only used here in the NT, which makes it all the more difficult to

understand. The word is used in the LXX of the OT, with οδους and means “to cut a straight path.” For example, in Prov 3:6, “In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your *paths straight*.” The leading Greek lexicon says “*guide the word of truth along a straight path*.” It also mentions other meanings such as “teach the word aright, expound (it) soundly, shape rightly,” and even “preach fearlessly.” There are two approaches to what Paul means and I will always seek to follow the one that fits best in the context. The first approach is what I would say has been used extensively in the past by dispensationalists, to sort of argue our position. Our position is that there are various dispensations and that if these are not recognized then the expositor is not “rightly dividing the word of truth.” So this approach says that what Paul is telling Timothy is that he must teach the word correctly, making the proper dispensational distinctions of innocence, conscience, government, promise, law, grace and kingdom. However, this meaning doesn’t really make sense in the context. The context is about not getting caught up in trifling discussions. The second approach is that it’s saying stay on the straight track when teaching the word of God, not getting distracted by arguments about trivial things. That’s really what the verse before and the verse after are talking about. Paul is warning Timothy against getting involved in trivial discussions in verse 14 and discussing worldly things that are vanity in verse 16 because they will have a negative effect on fellow believers. So, I’m of the conviction that this second approach is the right one. Paul is saying cut straight in teaching the word of God, meaning do not get distracted by minor issues that distract you from teaching the things which are sound doctrine. Paul refers to such a one as a **workman**. There are several workmen who have to cut straight in their disciplines; surgeons, stone masons, road builders, construction workers, farmers, et. al. We don’t know if Paul had any of these in mind when he referred to being a diligent workman in the Scriptures, but we do know this, being a teacher of God’s word requires the teacher to cut the word of truth straight, meaning staying on the task of teaching the word and not getting off in talking about all kinds of other things that may be interesting, may tickle the ears, may be attractive, may sound academic, but ultimately are trivial in the grand scheme, and focusing on them is the equivalent of cutting a crooked path to a destination. You give your hearers the sense that something relatively unimportant is crucial. So, Paul is warning Timothy against that, and really, telling him that he needs to be diligent in his teaching ministry to emphasize the core doctrines of Christianity. Now that we’ve solved that, let’s look at the rest of the verse. **Be diligent**. This means to “make every effort, to be zealous.” If we have to make every effort, then it’s hard work. And it is hard work to study and teach the word of God. Few people know what I do until they try to do it themselves, and even then, they don’t really know what I do in the study to prepare these lessons. And it’s not just in the study, it’s all the time because you engage in this much study and it consumes a lot of your thinking. That’s why I try to do a lot of other things, especially keeping myself busy with projects, because my brain needs a rest from contemplating these things. In fact, in Rabbinic Judaism, it has long been held that the rabbi was not permitted to study all day, he could only study half the day and the rest had to be spent in other types of labor. And the reason is because they saw it was not good for them to study all the time. And I personally don’t think it’s very healthy, either from a fitness point of view or from a medical point of view. I think it does harm to sit and study for seven or eight hours a day. And I don’t think you see Christ doing that in the Gospels or Paul in the Epistles or

Elijah in Chronicles. It's not normal. But when you do study, as Paul says here, you should **be diligent**, meaning "make every effort." To do what? **To present yourself...to God.** This means your main audience is Him. It's not the people. You people are in the room. But when I teach I'm presenting myself before Him, and, of course, you are to do this when you teach VBS, a Bible study, a men's group, a woman's group. They are there, but your main audience is God. And, of course, what you want to do is present yourself **approved to God.** The word **approved** is from δοκιμαζω which means "tried and true" or "tested and proven to be true." And the way you do this is you cut the word straight, meaning you stay on topic. You don't tell stories about yourself, you don't go down every rabbit trail, you can use some illustrations to convey a point, but use them sparingly because all illustrations fall short, so what you do, and this is an absolute criteria for selecting a pastor or deciding on a church, you always are asking, is he staying with the word of God, is he going along with the text or is it all filler? That's what most pastors present, a lot of filler that means nothing. It's just stories. And I can tell you what they are doing in the study, N-O-T-H-I-N-G. They're not studying at all. They read those books called "3000 Sermon Illustrations" and junk like that. They don't read the word. They've got 25 canned sermons and they just change them a bit and rotate them and it's the same old stupid sermons. They're not being diligent workmen, yet they are standing in the presence of God, and it's not a joke. They don't realize how much trouble they are going to be in at the judgment seat of Christ. As this verse says, they're going to be **ashamed.** There is a very real danger of that. If you don't get in there and hammer out looking at the English text and the Greek or Hebrew text next to it, and do your word studies, look at usage in context, do comparison studies, do syntax analysis, read the historical background and culture, and work hard on how to articulate this to your audience, you're not doing the job of a workman and you are going **to be ashamed** at the judgment seat of Christ. But if you are doing all those things then you have no **need to be ashamed.** You're working hard and that was what Timothy was to do, and not let all these other discussions distract you, stay on the word of God and hammer it out year after year after year.

Note verse 16 the contrast, **But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene.** The words **worldly and empty chatter** are from the Greek word βεβηλοσ and means "pertaining to being accessible to everyone and therefore devoid of real significance, pointless, worthless." In other words, if the conversation is material that is accessible to everyone, meaning believers and unbelievers, then it's not valuable, it's devoid of any real significance, it's worthless. It could be politics, which is ultimate for unbelievers, it could be philosophy, devoid of Scriptural controls, it could be any area of life cut loose from the word of God, and if so it simply has no value. And yet, that is what most Christians talk about. That was one thing that stuck out about my wife's family. It wasn't like that. They were openly discussing all sorts of Biblical ideas; sovereignty, cause-effect, Christ, prayer, you name it, it was on the table being discussed openly. And it's what I was attracted to. But most people, Christians I mean, do not fill their daily conversation with anything other than **worldly and empty chatter**, stuff that really doesn't matter. And that kind of stuff certainly shouldn't be coming over the pulpit. It's a waste of time. So what does Paul instruct Timothy to do with such conversation? **Avoid** it. The word means "go around it," even to "shun" it. Personally, I get bored by it. But most

people are hiding and they don't want to expose themselves at any point simply to engage in this kind of empty talk because it has the appearance of substance, but without the reality thereof. They talk about sports, the weather and every other subject that anyone can access and all it is is a shell game. They are hiding.

And then Paul gives the reason, **for it will lead to further ungodliness**. Discussing things without Scriptural controls, as if these ideas are neutral, **will lead to further ungodliness**. There was already **ungodliness** at Ephesus because the word of God was not being taught, but worldly conversation was continuing because it was safe. But if this continued it would **lead to further ungodliness**. The word **ungodliness** is *asabeia* and refers to "disrespect for God" or "dishonor of God." When we saturate our conversation with things that are not of God, when He is not included as the final point of reference for discussing any topic, then it is ungodly, it is disrespecting Him because it is acting as if He is unrelated to something. The Greek translation, literally says, "for they will progress to great ungodliness," Those who continue in this pattern will progress toward great ungodliness, one error leads to another, greater disrespect of God will be the result.

But that won't be the end of it, verse 17 says, **and they're talk will spread like gangrene**. The word **gangrene** is a medical term referring to "a disease that if left unchecked can become destructive." It can be translated "gangrene" or "cancer." It is best translated "cancer" in our day. If cancer goes unchecked it spreads and spreads until it takes over your whole body and kills you. By parallel, that's what will happen when one group over here is all chatty about worldly things, always talking about issues unrelated to God, then it **will spread** like cancer and other groups of Christians will talk the same way and all the people in the church will become enmeshed in worldly thinking patterns. It will become endemic, it already is endemic in most of the Church. So we are to avoid that kind of empty talk.

Now in the middle of verse 17 Paul begins to give an example of two believers, evidently two men that Timothy knew, who had already been taken over by worldliness. He says, **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**. These two men were from Ephesus, one of them was mentioned previously in 1 Tim 1:20, **Hymenaeus**, and it says there that Paul turned him over to Satan so that he might be taught not to blaspheme. So this man, if it's the same man, had gone off the deep end. The other man we don't know anything else about, but he too had gone off the deep end. Both these men had fallen into the worldly pattern of empty talk that Paul is warning Timothy about and had consequently **gone astray from the truth**. Interestingly, the two men are believers who **had gone astray**. They had once believed **the truth**, but now they no longer believed the truth. The reason is because they did not let the Scripture control their thoughts, they ventured into worldly and empty chatter and eventually denied the future literal, physical, bodily resurrection. **saying that the resurrection has already taken place**. Apparently, they permitted some kind of past resurrection. It was most likely a spiritual resurrection that occurred at faith or baptism, but what they would not permit was a future bodily resurrection. The worldly chatter they had gotten involved in was Greek philosophy and their ideas of the

afterlife. This was a popular idea among the Greek thinkers. The Greek perspective on resurrection is seen in Acts 17:32 when Paul preached at Athens before the Areopagus. On that occasion, when he mentioned the resurrection of the dead, it says, "some began to sneer." Liftin said, "Greek philosophers typically viewed the soul as immortal and the body as its temporal prison. The idea of the physical resurrection of the body, both Christ's and the Christians', was therefore foreign and difficult for them to grasp. Hence there was a natural tendency toward heresies which rejected bodily resurrection (1 Cor. 15; Acts 17:32). The heresy of Philetus and Hymenaeus probably involved the idea that resurrection was a purely spiritual affair which occurred at conversion or baptism. But bodily resurrection is the keystone of Christian doctrine, as Paul showed (1 Cor. 15). Without it, the entire edifice of the gospel collapses. Little wonder then that Paul said that these two false teachers destroy the faith of some (cf. 1 Tim. 1:19)." These two men were spreading their ideas and they were spreading like cancer among others, causing their faith to be wrecked. To make matters worse, Timothy wasn't doing anything about it. He was too afraid of Nero's persecution to stand against these false teachers. As a consequence, this false teaching was growing like cancer. Now there was a real danger of the church at Ephesus running headlong into full apostasy.

In verse 19, despite the fact that these two men went astray from the truth, the **firm foundation of God stands**. The **firm foundation** is the truth of the word of God itself, not the church as most suggest. Despite the fact that some reject the truth does not affect the truth. It still stands. It has one **seal** with two sides. The first side is that **"The Lord knows who are His."** This saying probably comes from Numb 16:25-26 where Korah had led a rebellion against Moses. In that passage, the Lord disciplined Korah and her followers to demonstrate that Moses was His servant. In the same way, the Lord would discipline Hymenaeus and Philetus for their rejection of the truth. The second side of the seal is that **"Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness."** This is saying that those who profess **the Lord** are supposed **to abstain from wickedness**. It does not say they will **abstain from wickedness**, only that they are **to abstain from wickedness**. Thus, if someone proclaims the **name of the Lord** but then practices wickedness, they are supposed to be challenged **to abstain from wickedness**. We should not let Christians continue in wickedness if they openly proclaim Christ. They should be challenged.

In summary, in verse 14, Timothy was to remind his congregation at Ephesus about the things in the previous verses, namely that if they endure they will enjoy the reward of reigning with Him, if they deny, they will be denied rewards, but even if they are faithless, He is faithful. He was also to authoritatively charge them in the presence of the mighty God not to argue about trifling things, tier two and tier three things, which have no benefit to others and lead to intellectual catastrophe for those who hear. Instead, as verse 15 says, Timothy should be diligent to present himself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, staying on task in teaching the word of God rather than being distracted by trifling or worldly ideas that tickle the ears. In verse 16, also avoid pointless conversation that is accessible to anyone, for it is simply worldly and will cause progress in greater ungodliness. And in verse 17, if they are permitted to continue to teach it will spread like

cancer. Among those false teachers were Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who had gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection was spiritual only, occurring at their conversion or baptism, and this had already upset the faith of some. But despite these departures, verse 19 says that the truth of God stands, having this seal; on one side, that the Lord knows who belong to Him, and on the second side, those who do belong to Him should abstain from wickedness.”

In conclusion, what can we learn? The teaching of the word of God is to be the focus of the one who ministers. He should not get sidelined by trivial or controversial teachings. He should major on the majors and minor on the minors. He should also steer clear of worldly kinds of discussions since they only lead to accepting the world’s teachings and upsetting others. But, while some may go astray from the truth, the truth is the truth, and the Lord knows who belongs to Him and those who do belong to Him should not walk in wickedness.